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ABSTRACT

This study identified the needs, aspirations, and hindrances defining and delineating adult literacy education in the Riverina region, New South Wales, Australia. Information sources were policy, opinion, memories, literature, and statistics. A profile of the region showed that the population was basically white and of Anglo-Saxon heritage. Riverina dwellers had regarded themselves as predominantly farming types, but Riverina was becoming more urbanized. The adult literacy offerings were varied and represented attempts by different organizations to respond to needs of adult learners. Their impact was affected by inadequate staffing, low levels of community information about literacy, and shoestring budgets. The literature showed different definitions of literacy that affected the debate about the regional response to literacy needs. Four separate perspectives were identified that established a specially Riverina flavor, although also having universal applicability: views of education, community attitudes toward nonreaders/writers, misconceptions about the process of becoming literate, and regional details that prevented people from pursuing literacy education. Case studies of two Riverina towns examined the importance that their populations attached to literacy and the regional features that influenced the status of literacy and access to literacy tuition. (46 references; 8 figures) (YLB)

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Riverina Regional Council of Adult Education

A Word From the Riverina:

Perspectives on Adult Literacy Education

A report by

Roslin E. Brennan

Mark Brennan

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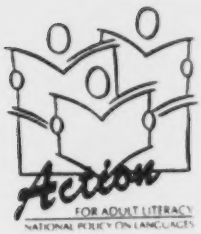

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THE WORD FROM THE RIVERINA IS:

* Key community people need to be better informed about literacy and how it is developed.

* Providers have actively to recruit students.

* Community-based programmes work best.

* Different formats for tuition have to be available and in non-institutional settings.

* Becoming literate may mean having to change relationships, views and responsibilities.

* General community support and understanding is vital for any widespread change.

* Access to providers is determined by travel, child care and finance.

* Embarrassment is the biggest barrier.

HOW IT ALL HAPPENED

Early in 1988, the government's National Language Policy Program, through the Adult Literacy Action Campaign (ALAC), allocated the sum of $225,000 to the N.S.W. Board of Adult Education to fund literacy initiatives for adults, and of this some $30,000 was then allocated to the Riverina Regional Council of Adult Education. The Board of Adult Education's guidelines for funding stressed that the resources generated by the funding and the outcomes of any research should be available for the use of *all* adult literacy providers so that public awareness of the value of literacy could be developed. This was exciting news, and in May 1988 (even before the money actually arrived) the Council determined to set up a Working Party "consisting of representatives of TAFE and Evening Colleges in Wagga Wagga, Albury and other government departments concerned".

The Council's Executive Officer, Kathy Carman, was instructed to call an initial meeting of the committee consisting of Pam Osmond (Wagga Wagga TAFE), Shirley Rubenis (Leeton TAFE), Debbie Flynn (Dept of Education), Robyn McPherson (Adult Education College-Riverina), and Mark Brennan (Charles Sturt University - Riverina). Rivlit, as the Working Party immediately became known, met for the first time on 30 May 1988 to consider the Council's guidelines and how best it could become an active force for the region. To enhance the expertise available to the committee the Council elected its treasurer, Robert Seaman, (Charles Sturt University - Riverina) to the Rivlit committee and also nominated Barbara Leddin from the Second Chance Literacy Program of the Albury-Wodonga Continuing Education Centre. Mark Brennan was named by the committee as its chairman.

Rivlit members agreed "that the aim of the committee should be to sell the nature and value of literacy in the region", and "that the group should produce a 'Travelling Road-Show' which might consist of - a set of posters, a film, a discussion guide for a seminar".

The Regional Council endorsed the idea that mobile resources could best meet the diverse needs of such a large region, and from this has grown the mobile literacy publicity and resource unit housed in a specially constructed trailer, designed to be towed by car throughout the Riverina region as from March 1990.

The total project as funded through the BAE then consisted of (a) the mobile information and resource unit which was the responsibility of the committee, and (b) the investigation of adult literacy needs in the region by a research Project Officer. March 1989 was a notable month for the Council's sponsorship of adult literacy in the region, in that Roslin Brennan was appointed as the Project Officer and Susan Benedyka replaced Kathy Carman as the Council's Regional Adult Education Officer (and as the Rivlit Executive Officer). At this point the literacy initiative's two-pronged approach became greatly strengthened, and the committee was expanded to bring in a wider representation.

The task of the Project Officer during 1989 was to present a report to Council on adult literacy education needs in the region, and it is this document which the Council is now making available to a wider readership in the present publication. It is an important survey of the situation as it affects (and is affected by) people in the Riverina, but will be of great value to those concerned with adult literacy anywhere.

Intensive work on these two parts of the project was undertaken throughout 1989, and both have been completed in time for their official launching as a contribution to International Literacy Year 1990. The trailer contains posters, photographs and other publications, as

well as video equipment for which a specially scripted and locally produced video tape has been recorded. The photographic interpretation of rural readers and writers was also produced locally and is designed to capture the interest of the people of the Riverina. During 1990, the Project Officer will take the mobile unit to many townships in the Riverina. This unit may be borrowed from the Regional Council by other adult education agencies in the area, as may copies of the excellent videotape.

The work of Roslin Brennan as Project Officer, Mark Brennan as Chairman of the Rivlit committee, and Susan Benedyka as Executive Officer is acknowledged with appreciation. The thanks of the whole community will be expressed through the use made of the mobile unit, the videotape and the report during 1990 and beyond. The Riverina Regional Council of Adult Education also recognises the important contributions made by many other people throughout the region and individual Council and Rivlit committee members. In particular, the Regional Council would like to record its debt to Charles Sturt University - Riverina for special facilities afforded to the Project Officer and for undertaking the management of the Rivlit funds.

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RIVERINA REGIONAL COUNCIL OF ADULT EDUCATION (1989)

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SUSAN BENEDYKA
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RIVLIT PROJECT STEERING COMMITTEE (1988-1989)

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A WORD FROM THE RIVERINA: PERSPECTIVES ON ADULT LITERACY EDUCATION has been written with the help, support and encouragement of many people. The National Languages Policy funded the project through the Riverina Regional Council of Adult Edfucation. The Rivlit committee made up of people all with a commitment to literacy education for everyone developed the questions which focus this report. The committee directed the progress of the report and contributed time, information and constant support. This committee, chaired by Mark Brennan, consisted of Robyn McPherson, Elizabeth Bailey, Bernadette Kennedy, and Shirley Rubenis. This original group was joined by Robert Seaman and Edward Reid-Smith as representatives of the Riverina Regional Council of Adult Education, and Roslin Brennan as Project Officer. Susan Benedyka offered administrative support to this committee.

The Dean of the School of Education at Charles Sturt University - Riverina, Dr Eddie Braggett, provided an office for the final phase of writing up, and Glenn Ross shared this office space with great patience. Individuals all over the Riverina agreed to be interviewed, and then freely discussed the issues of literacy and the directions which can be taken to make its learning more accessible to a greater number of people. Ideas and contributions from TAFE, the Evening College and the NSW Department of Education all added dimensions to the writing, through the variety of experiences which they highlighted.

Dick Mead from the Regional Office of Education helped to make sense of pages of figures, and offered statistical guidance. Geoff Bamberry and David Jones, from Charles Sturt University - Riverina, provided different and detailed regional perspectives which broadened the view of the Riverina.

Irene Mills from the Library at Charles Sturt University - Riverina, guided the literature search with precision and competence, and Stephen Black from ALIO opened up his office's literature and facilities with a great sense of sharing.

Tom Goss from Coolamon Central School read and detoxified the original text, excluding all patronizing and generalizing statements with neat red lines. Finally, colleagues and friends listened to me talk and offered support and encouragement. My family adjusted flexibly to my extensive travelling, my peculiar timetable and the last intensive stage of writing up. A WORD FROM THE RIVERINA is about the complex relationship between ideas, attitudes, and literacy. I hope that it offers guidance to everyone involved in literacy teaching, and that it confirms the importance of becoming and being a literate person in Australia in the 1990's.

ROSLIN BRENNAN

CHAPTER 1

A WORD FIRST

International Literacy Year will focus the attention of educators, employers and members of the general community on what it means to read and write. Students of adult literacy classes, and committed non-students, will in turn have their definitions of themselves and their options for moving about our literate society set for them. 1990 is a chance for a wide audience to appreciate what being literate is and what is involved in the process of becoming literate. It will also be an opportunity for educators to explain to others that being literate is not so much a finished state as a way of being. That way of being involves having access to the variety of ways our society organises, defines and operates.

Recognising the opportunity of 1990 the Riverina Regional Council of Adult Education, using available National Languages Policy grant money, sought a way of responding critically and constructively to the adult literacy needs of the region. The Rivlit committee, made up of representatives of all the interested educational groups in the community, was established and A WORD FROM THE RIVERINA is the research report commissioned by the committee on behalf of the council.

That committee also commissioned a photographic interpretation of non reader/writers, a video to address potential students, a community information library and a trailer to tour the region. Together all this has come to be known as the Rivlit Mobile Roadshow. A WORD FROM THE RIVERINA is the essential account however which the roadshow and all other educational offerings in the region will need to take notice of as they strive to connect customers and services.

Since the report was commissioned all sectors of education in NSW have felt the effects of sweeping policy and bureaucratic changes and at the time of going to press agencies are still trying to work out their roles and responsibilities.

It is intended that this publication equip all those who are concerned in whatever capacity, to respond to the needs, aspirations and hindrances which define and delineate adult literacy education in the Riverina. Perspectives have been created by drawing together information from many sources. Policy, opinion, recounts, memories, literature and statistics are all utilised. The underlying aim of the study is to present those perspectives in such a way that those who are concerned to design services which have a wider appeal than at present can do so. It is about appreciating what needs to be done to engage more students in the process of becoming literate. Engaging people in organized learning, especially for whom school and all that "paper work" are unpleasant mirrors of their own inadequacy, is a job of bringing together policy, action and personal histories. This report seeks to provide those connections and patterns which either allow this to happen or not. The task of bringing all this information together was undertaken on the premise that the proportion of adults in the region who need support with literacy development is much greater than that which attend classes or tutorial sessions at present. It is thus an attempt to find out what needs to be done in order to activate the announcement painted on the side of the Rivlit trailer "Reading and Writing for Everyone".

A WORD FROM THE RIVERINA opens with a brief outline of the data gathering and connecting procedure employed in the study. This is followed by a brief description of the

region and the variety of ways in which this is achieved. The concepts and premises which drive our concern and appreciation of literacy as a general issue are set out and some basic facts and figures follow. Four separate perspectives are then developed which although having universal applicability seek to establish a specially Riverina flavour. Views of education, community attitudes towards non reader/writers, misconceptions about the process of becoming literate, and some of the telling details of the region are all addressed here. The report concludes with a cameo of two towns and their relationships with adult literacy education. Although the publication generates a set of propositions the real outcomes of the study will lie in the interpretations by adult literacy educators of the data and perspectives presented, during 1990 and beyond.

Whether we are concerned specifically with adults learning the requirements of the workplace, seeking further education, developing aesthetic senses, or finding their way around, we are concerned with the general enterprise of enabling individuals and groups to share the common resource of language. Upon this subject there is no doubt that the year will provide the space for argument, public pronouncements and many statements to the nation. Amongst the search for solutions comes A WORD FROM THE RIVERINA.

CHAPTER 2

APPRECIATING THE DATA

"One reads and selects one's data, and reads and selects again and again, knowing that the dangers of misrepresentation are high, but also knowing that there would be little chance of consensus, except perhaps on the most obvious points, if one invited the opinions of others about what to include." (p 7 Peshkin, A.)

The whole study deals with the way people use literacy in their communities, in their homes, and in their workplaces for knowledge, recreation and information. It is specifically related to how people regard literacy in the Riverina, and what factors might account for the lack of patronage of adult literacy classes and services in this region. This chapter introduces the ways in which information about these concerns is solicited and sorted.

The Concerns Defined

The statistics concerning adult literacy in Australia create one dimension of the issue. The Department of Employment Education and Training in Canberra has recently released a poster which announces, "One million Australians cannot read and write properly." The extent to which this figure is helpful as a piece of data is dubious. The definition of the term 'properly' is critical in arriving at any numerical measure of literacy levels in Australia, low or otherwise. If we agree that literacy is a concept which can only be effectively defined by the relationship between the individual and the demands of their own particular literate environment then this statistic has little meaning.

Another gauge of the level of literacy in Australia is created by taking account of the number of people who actively seek help. On a state wide basis it is estimated that literacy classes attract only 5% of those people who need help to become more effective readers and writers. (Adult Literacy Council, 1988). The low level of response to literacy tuition is the problem which confronts the whole of Australia and this study addresses this problem in the Riverina.*

People

The method of study employed here relies on a variety of techniques and strategies to collect information. The pool of data thus created informs the recommendations which appear in the final section of the report. The first mass of such data is created by talking with the people of the region. Teachers, tutors and co-ordinators involved in the running of adult literacy classes of different styles and sizes provide one set of perspectives.

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* It should be noted here that although, for the purposes of this report these estimates are accepted as conventional wisdom, their reality or accuracy are by no means clear or irrefutable. Fresh statistical research is long overdue.

Community figures involved in guiding the health, welfare and legal structure of the community provide yet another set of perspectives on the issue of adult literacy in the region. People involved in classes, and people who are not, focus our attention sharply on the problems which individuals face when confronting and accommodating their low literacy levels. All these perceptions, anecdotes, experiences and opinions are then pooled, sorted and cross referenced. There are statements of solid agreement. There are also clear expressions of disagreement; differences in focus and philosophy; and a high diversity of experience. From this collection a set of propositions emerge which allow us to discuss why services are under utilised in the Riverina and how they can be more effectively promoted.

The solutions to the problem of low participation rates in community literacy programs in the Riverina will come only after a careful blending of the information obtained from the variety of people interviewed. The value of such a method lies in its scope, its flexibility and its focus on diversity rather than consensus to establish the parameters of a discussion of adult literacy in a special context. Literature and other research findings add another dimension to the discussion by placing our regional concerns in a more global context; the big picture will help us to make sense of the smaller one.

Introducing the People

The people interviewed in this study of adult literacy in the Riverina represent a cross section of both urban and rural populations. Some come from small townships such as Moama and others live in the larger urban centres of Wagga Wagga and Albury-Wodonga. They hold a variety of jobs; some of which require professional qualifications and others which do not require formal training of any kind. Some are unemployed. Some know a lot about literacy both theoretically and from experience; others have well expressed intuitions and others have not thought about literacy as an issue in great detail at all.

However every person spoken to recognises that being a literate person in our society is important. Some point out the pressures being exerted on the literate abilities of every member of the present workforce. Issues such as productivity, award restructuring, broad banding, and the constant calls for enterprise and vocational dynamism imply that the era of one job for life is almost at an end. The workplace of the next century will be a much more flexible, and hopefully, interesting place. It will also be a much more demanding place. "With the increasing communication demands of today's technological age, many people who would not long ago have entered the workforce in unskilled or semi skilled positions, now find that they have insufficient communication skills and have joined the ranks of the unemployed. Others have found that they require retraining, but most retraining programs assume a high level of literacy." (Nature of Communication in the Workplace in Adult Literacy Action Campaign: Project Around Australia. p 4)

The individual responsibility for education both personal and professional is clear. To be part of the workforce specifically, and the society generally, post industrial Australia demands that the individual be literate beyond survival and beyond pure functionalism. Issues of equity and participation imply that as far as is possible every person must be able to access and react to information equally. Being literate is the prerequisite for the exercise of these rights.

Some people admit that they are surprised at the extent of poor literacy skills in the general population. Nevertheless they all know someone who cannot read and write effectively. They also admit that they have not thought of the problem of low literacy as being one that affects a significant proportion of the population. The problem is defined only in anecdotal

terms with little applicability to wider general community. When D.E.E.T's statement that 'one million Australians can't read and write properly' is quoted, many people are understandably surprised, and then shocked. When they examine their own experiences more closely and focus their memories on the issue of reading and writing they begin to recognise that the person who is the subject of their own anecdote is not alone.

The extent to which the community in general is aware of literacy problems constituted a significant part of a research project conducted in Canberra. The findings are an echo from the Riverina.

"The Project Team believed that in the ACT there was a false assumption that the population was highly literate; there were many people experiencing difficulties with literacy and numeracy, some of whom were employed and some unemployed ... many people over 25 had definite goals for the future but were prevented from pursuing these goals because of poor literacy/numeracy skills, unemployment or under employment and severe financial restrictions." ('New Start' in Adult Literacy Campaign, Projects Around Australia. Occasional Paper Number 3. p 2)

Talks and Discussions with the People

The responses offered by the people interviewed during this study varied with background and experience. The local solicitor reacted to the questions quite differently to the Adult Literacy Co-ordinator at the TAFE.

In every interview the following base level questions were asked somewhere and somehow during the course of the conversation:

1. **Do you ever come across material that you can't read?**
2. **If a friend or acquaintance asked you to recommend someone who could help them with their reading and writing, who would you recommend?**
3. **What does being literate mean?**
4. **Would you be surprised if I told you that about one million Australians cannot read past the major headline in a newspaper?**
5. **Why do you think people can't read or write?**
6. **Tell me about a person you have come across who can't read or write.**
7. **Why do people, who have problems with their literacy, not seek help?**
8. **Do you know anything about the services that are available for people who have problems with their literacy in this community?**

These questions were sufficiently open to invite wide discussion and most recorded interviews lasted at least thirty minutes. The 37 transcribed conversations furnish us with the individual perceptions and propositions which are the raw data for this study. Where the constraints of distance, time and the desire to preserve anonymity prevented oral interviews, informants supplied written answers to the questions.

Provisions for the People

"Never before has there been such groundswell and momentum, at national, State and community levels for righting the acute imbalance between the widespread need for adult literacy learning and the limited provisions for actually meeting the demand." (Preface, Grant, Audrey, N. 1987)

Within the Riverina region adult literacy tuition is provided by TAFE, The Adult Education College - Riverina Region Inc (better known as the Adult Evening College) and by Albury Wodonga Continuing Education. (See Chapter 4 for a detailed description of these provisions.)

Places

The interviews are from all over the Riverina - Deniliquin, Finley, Mathoura, Albury, Wagga Wagga, Hillston, Coolamon, Jerilderie, Corowa, Wodonga, Griffith and Narrandera. The smaller country towns are deliberately well represented in this distribution, because the problems of access to literacy services are most noticeable in the smaller rural centres with their declining population and economic fortunes. The larger urban centres of Wagga Wagga and Albury-Wodonga are well stocked with literacy services and whilst these may be under utilised in terms of the number of people who could seek literacy help, nevertheless the service is alive and well. The availability and anonymity afforded by such services in the larger centres is a bonus for the person seeking literacy help. The individual in a small country town who wishes to preserve their anonymity but who wants literacy tuition is an individual in a dilemma. Likewise the person with a low level of literacy who is unwilling to seek assistance is also limited. Some solutions to these types of literacy constraints in the Riverina region can be suggested by the data collected in this study. This is one of the values of research in small country towns.

People and their Places

Any individual's literate competencies cannot be separated from their experiences and the demands of various environments in which they find themselves. This study of adult literacy is firmly placed within these contexts and defined by the concern for observing and accepting the person in their world.

The complex of interactions between an individual and their society must be accounted for by any study which hopes to claim both credibility and authenticity. As well as focussing on individuals and their participant role in the world about them, this study must also accept the responsibility of assessing more global influences. These include considerations such as the ethics and philosophy of literacy, the implications of changing directions in government policy towards education, and the strength of community perceptions and opinions about the problems of literacy which exist. These influences with their intricate histories and nuances affect almost everyone in some sense.

What can we Learn from the People and their Places?

In speaking to people in the smaller country towns one is never allowed to become totally preoccupied with the generalising that comes with the production of the big picture.

The minute details of everyday life which join together to form a partial insight into somebody else's existence are of particular importance. These details are accessible and personal. The only credentials necessary are those of being willing to share time, conversations and reflections. These details provide a glimpse of the way in which different individuals deal with problems, react to circumstances, view their status and generally get on with the business of being alive. The following clip shows how one man coped with the problems created by a mismatch between his literate abilities and those demanded in his job.

"I was at the Remedial Centre one lunch time and a lady came in and she was the sister of a fellow who would be over 40 now. Anyway he had this terrific problem, and it was about to cause a split in the family. The lady asked if I could do something to help him immediately because she was afraid that the couple were going to split because the reading was causing so many problems. He had such an inferiority complex because his wife was so brilliant. He had all these problems and I saw him every Saturday morning until the class got going and then he went to the class. She eventually realised that there are a lot of people with this problem. He was in an engineering firm, he wasn't actually an engineer. I think he was a draughtsman and he was in charge of all these men. He would be given a plan in the morning of something new that he had to do with all the writing and instructions on it. He couldn't read it. He took it home at lunchtime and his wife would read it to him, and he would memorise it and he would go back and tell the men "you do this and you do that". And this is how he got by until he learnt to read himself."

Paul recounts his story about moving from childhood into adulthood in a small Riverina town in the 1960's. It has a particularly regional flavour and it offers some clear insights into the relationship between education, employment and literacy. It also offers us selected glimpses of some Riverina attitudes that have helped to shape the opinions which surround the issue of literacy now.

"See I left school when I was in sixth class - see I couldn't go on and I wasn't doing any good so I just left. It was a total loss actually. I sort of had a few years sort of dormant, then I got sort of working. I went away to boarding school when I was 7 and that was to straighten me out. It didn't work out either. That's just the difference in people. The first money I ever made was thirty-two pound a week. I was just on 14. That's good money. Then I was working on this other job. Five pound a day. That was lot of money. You knew there was a job there when you wanted it ... on the hay ... fencing... just a general farm hand. Always there and always good money. And to think of people on Social Security - that was never heard of."

The relationship between Paul's level of literacy, his subsequent employment status and his rural farming environment is clearly articulated, and because we need a regional picture of how adults regard reading and writing, talking will provide the canvas and the paint for the capturing of the picture.

Similarly those people who are not proficient readers and writers will be able to offer the closest and most accurate perceptions of how the less literate person deals with the

pressures of surviving in a post industrial society, a society in which traditional time divisions are being renegotiated, where work and leisure may eventually trade places and where issues of health, welfare and education assume preeminence. The importance of being a thinking literate person will be clarified as we move away from the survival nature of secondary industry towards the life improving characteristics and potential of tertiary industry.

Paul encapsulates these ideas when he says:

"It will eventually get harder and harder to get a job. You've got to have that little piece of paper. Like I've got a crane chaser's licence, a forklift ticket, a front end loader ticket, even got a backhoe ticket and on the forklift ticket it says that you must be able to read English. Well I got away with that one but it is one that will eventually come in really hard. It will get harder and harder to get. See when I first started driving a backhoe I didn't have a licence. Nobody in Brownsville had a licence. I just started driving. We drove it for three of four years before we got a licence. We never hurt anybody thank God. We must have been able to handle it alright. But now before the blokes get on the machinery they've got to have the ticket. It's a stipulation now that every bloke on the Shire has to have a ticket or they can't hop on the machinery. The job market is shrinking and shrinking."

Weaving Together the Threads

The first responsibility of this study is to gather information from people and to value its spontaneity and individuality. The information collected in this way then has to juxtaposed with the wider perceptions of the society from which these individuals come. This account then becomes a process of overlaying levels of information one on top of the other, in much the same way that overhead transparencies can be placed on top of one another. A conglomerate of experiences recorded on individual sheets of acetate will eventually project a picture of the subject of study which is much fuller and more telling than ever would have been the case if each sheet of information had been examined alone. Through the overlays will come points of high focus where information from a variety of sources will produce high resolution to support policy, theory or conventional wisdom. Other aspects on each of the 'sheets' will not focus or line up, and these may afford the clues to further insights. The writer is not necessarily looking for synonymy of information but for a patchwork of perceptions and ideas which allow the building of a picture which admits the differences which exist between people, and explanations and interpretations of how things happen in the real world.

This study of adult literacy in the Riverina starts with the big picture. The first sheets of acetate contain broad descriptions of the social, economic, political, demographic and historical map of the region. We then move down to the next layer; the organisations and institutions which provide literacy services in the region. Then we have the people; the people who provide the service plus those who refer others to those services, and naturally the users of the service. By cross referencing this information, and by using the information from one source to test information, we arrive at a deeper understanding of our initial concern. From this deeper understanding comes the possibility of responding more appropriately to the proposition which suggests that there is, compared to other regions in NSW an inertia in the Region.

The term which describes this process of drawing together strands of information from different places is 'triangulation'. "It is a technique which provides more and better

evidence from which researchers can construct meaningful propositions about the social world. The value of triangulation lies in providing evidence such that the researcher can construct explanations of the social phenomena from which they arise." (Mathison, S. 1988, p 15)

'Triangulation' defines the extremities of the debate. It sets the boundaries, and then provides the scaffolding for investigation and discussion. It is this informational webbing that allows the writer to explore issues. It demands that the writer put aside preconceived notions, theories and sophisticated hypotheses, and concentrate sensitively on the messages which people are giving. The goal of the researcher is not to produce a necessarily definitive set of truths but to explore the facets of one issue as they appear to the protagonists.

"The conception shifts the focus on triangulation away from a technological solution for ensuring validity and places the responsibility with the researcher for the construction of plausible explanations about the phenomena being studied." (Mathison, S. p 7)

The central question posed to conceptualise this study is: Why don't people who are poor readers and writers take more advantage of the literacy services which are available? The information, perceptions and sensitivities of all those people involved in this study are directed towards providing a set of propositions which help us to answer this question. The results of this research will not be unilaterally applicable to every instance of a reluctant adult reader or writer in the Riverina but they will help us to understand the constraints which are both universal and special to the region. The research will not provide a neat package of answers of solutions. However it will generate a clear set of propositions, which the providers of literacy services in the region must interpret in their own time and in their own ways.

CHAPTER 3

DOWN IN THE RIVERINA

"Where do you come from mate?"
"Riverina" .....
"Where?"
"Riverina".
"Oh, you mean down Albury and Wagga way".
"Yeah ..... Riverina".

This report is all about perspectives on adult literacy in the Riverina. It is a regional study of how people regard the activities of reading and writing, and the influences which mitigate against individuals acquiring literate status. The study incorporates the perceptions of a wide group of people whose social, political and economic contexts are accepted as equally legitimate topics for discussion and exploration. This chapter develops the 'big picture'. A profile of the region is drawn using descriptions, perceptions and accounts from a wide range of sources.

Some Boundaries and Dimensions

The term Riverina is often used. It appears in the media, in conversation and in government policy documents. It can be a planning region or a physical location. The average resident can describe the area, but with little geographic precision. Riverina is also an evolving term which has been in use for a long time. It is an ethic, a political flavour and a way of life.

The Riverina breeds it own dialect, pronunciation and sense of humour. It is characterised by small country towns, rural holdings, two large urban centres and a number of moderate sized centres. There are approximately one quarter of a million people living in an area of 155,388 square kilometres. It is renowned for its social stability and the slow pace at which change is absorbed. In comparison to larger and more multicultural regions it is dominated by conservative communities.

The regional title Riverina sometimes also disguises the diversity of the landscape. Temora, Wentworth, Moama and Tumut provide geographical images which are quite different from one another. The Riverina is a region which contains a wide variety of landforms, patterns of settlement and land uses. It is a region of climatic extremes. Its rivers are renowned for flooding and the prevalence of overhanging verandahs, open fire places and wide main streets testify to the differences between the seasons. It borders in places on a desert landscape and its residents are sobered by this taste of real environmental harshness.

Adult Literacy and the Riverina Region

These major and distinguishing characteristics of the Riverina region have to be considered if the issue of adult literacy is to be placed in a context which is socially understandable.

By placing the study of literacy in its own particular regional environment a set of regional responses can be made. The way in which people regard themselves and their relative positions in a society is critical to their perception of the value of reading and writing. If we want to understand the reasons behind the apparently low level of response to adult literacy tuition in this region we must have a firm and appreciative view of how the region holds together economically, politically, demographically and socially.

The Riverina region is, by definition, different from all other regions. We need to investigate how and why this sense of difference developed historically and how it influences community perceptions and attitudes today. This is particularly relevant when we look at the different levels of response to available literacy services.

Mapping the Territory

It seems that everyone has their own personal definition of the Riverina region. A literature search only complicates the issue of finding a regional definition. In an attempt to come to terms with the concept, as well as the reality, of the Riverina region we have to take account of the historical as well as the statistical dimensions of the area.

Interestingly enough the term 'region' seems to have been used when "..... people are looking for some unit midway between Nation or State and Locality, often to deal with problems that seem too local for the former and too global for the latter" (Spann, R.N: 1976) Geographers use the 'region' to discuss and describe areas which are different and geographers with different passions will find these differences a point for argument. As one states: "There are no physical features enabling the geographer to establish clear cut boundaries to this region (Riverina); the factors which give this area its regional character require detailed research ....." (Sale, C.J.)

The most recent edition of the Australian Encyclopaedia defines the Riverina as "... an extensive district in southern NSW. Today it is usually taken to be the country between the Lachlan River in the north and north west, and the Murray River in the south, the eastern boarder being roughly a line from Albury to Condobolin and including Wagga and Junee." (p 2497, Australian Encyclopaedia, Volume 7, 1988) As its title implies, Riverina is most distinctly "the land between the rivers." It is this connection between the two large river valleys which accounts for the region's fertility and agricultural flavour. It is a region with a diversity of landscapes - high mountains and low lying river plains. Thickly forested rough Australian scrub gradually gives way to thousands of square kilometres of flat treeless land where only the telegraph poles break into the uniformity of the landscape.

Historical Trekking

Historically, according to G.L. Buxton the author of "The Riverina 1861-1891 - An Australian Regional Study" (1967), the term Riverina was used by a group of settlers who wanted to create an independent and separate state in inland NSW. In 1857 J.D. Lang proposed an 'Inland and Riverine colony' to include the western two-thirds of NSW, with a possible corridor across the high Monaro to a seaboard outlet near Boyd Town on Twofold Bay." (Buxton, G.L. p 3) The pressure for the formation of a separate state encompassing the Riverina region reasserted itself in the 1920's and was epitomised by the pressure that was behind the call for the establishment of a University in the Riverina. There has always been a strong sense of political and social entitlement amongst the higher social orders of Riverina inhabitants.

"... in the 19th century every man defined his own Riverina to suit his own purpose." (Buxton, G.L. p 3) Little seems to have changed today. Limits, boundaries and regional descriptions are everywhere, but they are usually all different from one another both in detail and dimension. "For 19th century writers like Furphy, Paterson and Lawson no such problem existed; everybody knew where the Riverina was. Indeed it was only the recurrent attempts of disgruntled squatters who felt themselves neglected by Sydney, and later of Riverina citizens generally, to form a separate colony, that inspired any attempt to define the Riverina." (Buxton, G.L. p 3)

The issues surrounding the definition of regional boundaries have plagued politicians and administrators for many years. In 1883 some apparently overworked Royal commissioners on Land Laws in NSW noted the lack of resolution of the issue and the bureaucratic headaches that it caused." ... the want of one fixed unit of division for the colony has greatly added to the difficulty of presenting many matters in an intelligible form. Counties, Land Office Districts, Survey Districts, Pastoral Districts, Stock Inspectors Districts, Police, Census, Electoral and Licensing Districts, have all been arranged without any attempt at harmony, irrespective of general practical results. The Registrar General makes his statistics correspond with the Electoral Districts; the Lands Department uses Surveyors' and Land Districts; other branches of the Public Service refer to Police or Livestock districts, but non have adopted Counties as the basis of their operations, although they alone never change their areas or boundaries .... " (Buxton, G.L. p 2) The wishes of the Royal Commissioners in 1883 have still not been granted and perhaps ...."somewhere down Albury and Wagga way" are a good set of co-ordinates after all.

Regional Consensus

The objective description of the boundaries of the Region are quite different to the subjective perceptions of its inhabitants. The arguments about physical boundary considerations become gradually more subtle, and the distinctions increasingly more difficult to appreciate as the study of these issues develops and extends. "Telecom's 'region' differs from that of the Riverina Industry Development Board, and this in turn differs from other government departments. Use of uniform regional structure as enacted in the Regional Organisation Act (1972) would help to avoid the current diversity of regional boundaries and provide a consistent basis for research." (Bamberry, G., and Jones, D. p 4) This is not a set of arguments that would be particularly productive here except in so far as the regional definitions serve to delineate and define the population in which we are interested. The obvious solution is to unilaterally adopt one set of boundary definitions and accept that slight differences in results may be possible if other boundary criteria were chosen. For this reason the Department of Education's regional definition of the Riverina has been adopted here.

The Educational Region - Facts, Figures and Fictions

The map attached delineates the educational region of the Riverina which has an area of 155,388 square kilometres. Using the Department of Education classification system we see that the Riverina is the second largest educational region in NSW and it is only exceeded in size by the sheer volume of the western region. It has a population of 243,650 people. It includes two major urban centres, Wagga Wagga and Albury, and a number of smaller towns which serve as central points for the settlements around them. Griffith, Narrandera, Tumut and Temora are examples of moderately sized towns where services tend to focus.

Travelling the Roads

Perhaps one of the most significant features of the Riverina region are the distances that exist between towns. The distances between these towns and the time which it takes to travel these distances if you are a Department of Education employee in 1989 are shown in Figure 1. It is a grid with the educational Districts listed on the left hand axis. On the horizontal axis is a list of towns which are considered to be 'nodes of need' either because of the number of children in and around these towns or because of their isolation. These destination points have been generated by the Department of Education over a number of years. They have been chosen because of the frequency with which they have appeared as destination points in the journeys of Department of Education staff who visited them. These patterns themselves are a reflection of the evolving educational needs of the Riverina region. They are the delineators, the "nodes of need", the focal points for surrounding districts. They also have the greatest concentration of services and facilities in the region. This matrix has been developed in response to travel patterns which in turn reflect the needs and relative population concentrations of the Riverina region.

It takes about nine hours to drive from one side of the Riverina Region to the other. Travelling from Tumut to Mildura by car reflects the variety of human and physical landscapes which characterise the Region. High mountain country is replaced by the gentle hills of the wheat and sheep belt. Wagga Wagga and Albury offer a taste of urban living with large concentrations of population involved in the provision of decentralised government services, retailing and the services demanded by post industrial, urban Australia. The landscape changes again; the vegetation becomes more sparse, the landscape becomes more stark and the kangaroos more frequent. The loneliness of this part of the Riverina is appreciated by those who travel the roads. Mildura with its irrigated citrus groves is the western edge of the educational Region. Six hundred and ninety kilometres from door to door. It is not surprising that with such large distances involved there has been little historical agreement between government agencies and departments on the exact boundaries of such an immense Region. The settlement patterns and distances between places also means, as one resident perceptively commented, ".... that the Riverina is a microcosm of the rest of Australia - or 90% of it - vast distances broken here and there - generally on river courses, by small towns with the occasional large urban centre. You could be describing areas in WA, Qld, SA, Vic, and NT."

A Rural Heritage

The Riverina has, since the time of white occupation, been traditionally associated with broad acre wheat farming, the raising of sheep and cattle and irrigation agriculture. Its ambassadors are easily and jokingly identified at the Royal Easter Show by their polished leather work boots, their moleskin trousers, rough cotton shirts and their broad brimmed hats which shelter tanned Anglo Saxon complexions. The Region also supports people who work in heavy industry, who are self employed, who are part of the fast growing service sector, government employees and Army and Air Force personnel. The large urban centres no longer exist simply to service the needs of the agricultural community. They have an economic life of their own which has become self sustaining.

The Farming Community - A Fight for Survival

As with other rural regions the Riverina has been subject to swings of economic fortune since the 1960's when the population first began to move out of smaller country towns towards the sources of employment in larger regional centres and cities. The 1970's, with its government sponsored passion for decentralisation, brought people back to the major regional rural centres, (particularly Albury and Wagga Wagga). In the 1980's the trend seems to have been towards the independence of the large centres from the overall fate of the agricultural sector. These centres are no longer intrinsically dependent on the land. They have bureaucratic and business lives of their own. Small towns whose fortunes are tied to the earnings of those on the land, frequently have suffered decline. Drought, population drift and limited investment opportunities in small towns have contributed to their downward spiralling economies. Once they have got into this spin it is very hard to pull out. They do not have the economic infrastructure which allows them to "weather the storm" and the storms associated with changes in the rural economy have left a large bill for damages.

Farms in rural Australia have been abandoned at the rate of over 3,000 every year (Lawrence, G. July, 1989); higher levels of farm finance have been negotiated by many of the farmers who remain, in an attempt to maintain the viability of their enterprises; and generally there is a concerted effort on the part of many farmers to cut costs, work harder and increase efficiency. Whilst these latter developments are not necessarily hazardous and are in line with advertised and encouraged trends in the rest of the economy, the attendant stresses which the families and communities are placed under have been documented. Higher accident rates, increasing levels of suicide, physical illness and stress related disease are apparent. (Lawrence, G. p 8)

The disguised and growing levels of poverty and unemployment in rural areas are responsible for an increasing incidence of domestic violence and mental illness whilst counselling and other support services are being quickly removed from smaller country towns, if they were every there in the first place, and concentrated in regional centres. This sense of rural isolation is being reinforced by economic and political trends which are most certainly outside the control of the individual, and are unlikely to be affected by small town political representations. The farming community is used to being at the mercy of the elements and this philosophy requires only slight modifications to incorporate the international economy and the Federal government as factors which are as unpredictable and unfriendly to their status, as the weather.

Rural Crisis and Education

In terms of this study the impact of these rural changes is seen clearly in the value accorded to education. "All farm members - including children - are being expected to work harder, and, at times of reduced income there is a noticeable tendency for farm youth to remain on the farm rather than to attend agricultural colleges or other colleges. Rather than having a sound basis for farming, many farm children will be at a distinct disadvantage in relation to their peers and are likely to produce yet another generation of farmers who are poorly equipped educationally to cope with advanced agriculture." (Lawrence, G. 27th July, 1989)

The children who leave the family farm drift to the major centres to find employment, and those who remain to farm are unlikely to have the information available to them which would make their enterprise more efficient, competitive and generally profitable. Farming

is likely to be based on the conventional wisdoms of the region. Change is to be resisted. Education by default appears to have a low priority, and within this context literacy has even less status as an activity.

The Demon of Change

Dempsey (1983) in his article "Research in a Country Town: Why Bother?" also points out the social corollaries of declining populations in the smaller rural settlements. "These town have stagnating economies, service agricultural Districts with declining populations, and offer no career prospects to their young. Consequently those young people who want to 'better themselves' are forced to move to a major city. As there is little inward migration, the residual population consists largely of people who were born locally. For many of these people belief in the superiority of rural life and the inferiority of city life are major articles of faith." The basis of rural complacency and the tolerance of the status quo no matter how potentially debasing can be clearly seen. Survival of the town and the individual is predicated on a lack of change no matter how small or how personal. Preservation means just that. Things need to stay the same. Change is a legitimate threat which has brought bad fortune to the small town in its recent past.

People and Cities

Changing demographic conditions also account for the decline of the smaller country centres. The figures in Figure 2 reflect the population increases for the urban centre categories between 1954 and 1986. All urban centres showed an increase, with the inland centres recording the slowest rate of increase in the period. The coastal urban centres of NSW grew most rapidly.

Figure 3 analyses the inland statistical district population changes more closely. Since we are looking at the educational delineation of the Riverina region it is necessary to collapse Murray and Riverina and reform them as one region. The result is a profile of the Riverina as a region with a slow rate of population growth relative to the other divisions displayed.

The relative increase over the 15 year period has been 9.2% and this includes the growth of the two major urban centres of Albury and Wagga Wagga which would certainly account for a high proportion of the increased population in the region.

On a national basis ".... NSW is losing population relative to Queensland and Western Australia. In other words, its share of the Australian population is falling. Within the state the coastal areas are increasing their share, the metropolitan and sub metropolitan areas maintaining their share, while the inland is falling." (Bamberry, G. and Jones, D. p 10) "Throughout the last 20 years there has been a continued pressure on smaller settlements, particularly those smaller than 6,000 persons. The majority of these towns have experienced net migration losses over the last 25 years, as the centralisation trends which began in the late 50's have continued .... The opposite is true of the larger settlements. The NSW provincial centres are beginning to reach sizes that enable growth to be maintained even when there are a number of shocks to the local economy, since the local population generates considerable demand for goods and services." (Rural Settlements Program - Vol 1 - Overview and Summary, p5. Department of Planning, Research Centre, Sydney University, Australia 1989).

The obvious corollary to this population drift is the movement of government services to the points of greatest population concentration. This in turn stimulates the provincial

markets and the spiral of large centre growth continues on its upward path often at the expense of the smaller country towns which continue to lose population, services and economic well being. The figures provided by the Department of Education on the distribution of the total state school population categorised according to regions allows us a further opportunity to speculate about what might happen to the future population in the Region. The school population is amongst the lowest in the state. There are few potential child bearers moving through the education system and it would be logical to expect that our pattern of population distribution will continue to be characterised by an ageing population of post war baby boomers. "The smaller families and reduced birth rates of the late 1970's and 1980's mean that towns will have fewer school leavers coming onto the job market." ('Rural Settlements - Planning for the Future.' Planning Research Centre, University of Sydney, 1989).

The total population of the Riverina region (as per figure 3) was 243,650 in 1986 - the time of the last census.

White, Middle Class and Anglo Saxon

The other characteristic of the Riverina's population is its cultural homogeneity. The population is basically white and of Anglo Saxon heritage. The figures from the Department of Education cited in Figure 8 show that only a small proportion of the State's Koori or non English speaking populations are to be found in this region. This monoculturalism sets this region apart from many others in NSW particularly from those urban regions where Koori and non English speaking people make up a significant proportion of the population.

Country people are renowned for their apparent social stability. They are often caricatured as being slow speakers and politically conservative. They are slow to accept change. Depending on the generosity and sensitivity of the person describing the social and political atmosphere of country life it can be seen as supportive and community oriented or suffocating and socially immobilising. As one Hillston resident said, *"What gives the country its strength also sometimes is its greatest weakness. Social relationships within a community are always slow to change."*

The Realities of Change

Up until recently Riverina dwellers would have regarded themselves as predominantly farming types, but the profile of settlement and population classified by occupation has changed. The gradual increase in the skill level required for jobs has disenfranchised some of those individuals who were previously the manual labourers, the unskilled workers, the council employees.

The question arises as to how accurate is the perception that in the country, a non reading/writing population can be absorbed? Given the changing patters of population and work force distribution and the increasing importance of the major towns in the region is it realistic to think that problems with reading and writing will not be a factor mitigating against employment or promotion prospects? How easy is it to get a job now? The folk wisdom has been that the country town could look after its own. With a general shrinkage in farm revenues and the application of heavy machinery and technology to farming and the drift to the urban centres and the general disintegration of small town rural economies, is it viable any longer to think that employment prospects for the poor reader and writer remain intact - the same as they were 20 or 30 years ago?

This thinking is a residue of a past economic era when population distribution was quite different to that of today. A continued general decline in rural population and a specific growth of the larger urban regions at the expense of the smaller country towns means that such views have to be reassessed.

Margaret, a community health worker at Mathoura commented, *"The husband or whoever is the bread winner for the family, if they can't get a cleaning job or something like that, it's the wood or charcoal burning. You don't even need to know how to sign your name. You can get a job as a roustabout in a woolshed and earn more money than a stock and station agent. No demand to read and write ...."* Within the next few years how valid will such a comment be?

In summary the personality of the Riverina region is changing. It is becoming a more urbanised area. It has a low rate of overall population growth with the greatest impact of economic change being felt in the farm sector.

The fortunes of many small towns are falling away, and the rural drift to the cities is part of the larger NSW pattern of population redistribution. As one demographer from the Department of Education said, "Australia is becoming a great big population doughnut."

Government services will continue to aggregate in the larger urban centres, but it is unrealistic to expect that the level of government provision of services is likely to increase. Riverina will not be entitled to more of the same. The demography does not justify increasing expenditure. In fact in some cases it is likely that services will be reduced or regionalised, rather than localised.

Services can be redistributed but generally the expectation is that they will not be significantly increased. The implications of this for adult literacy tuition will occupy a later section of the report.

CHAPTER 4

THE PROVIDERS

"Never before has there been such groundswell and momentum, at national, state and community levels for righting the acute imbalance between the widespread need for adult literacy learning and the limited provisions for actually meeting the demand."

(Grant, A. 1987, p ix)

> This chapter is a profile of the different types of adult literacy tuition provided in the Riverina. Whatever the shape of organisational structures in 1990 and beyond it is clear that funding, training and deployment of services will have to fit both the special characteristics of the non literate learner and the features of the Riverina region.

In the Riverina the different types of adult literacy tuition are the result of institutional attempts to balance community needs against the constraints of government finance and distance. Different contexts produce or attract different styles of tuition. The mixture of teaching formats which is workable in the large urban centre will not be found in the small isolated town on the western fringes of the region. Services will flourish and proliferate where the population concentration is highest and predictions of growth are statistically sound. In the Riverina the only areas showing concerted growth rates are the urban conglomerates of Wagga Wagga and Albury-Wodonga. The smaller towns are losing their services to the pace of self sustaining development which is now characteristic of these large centres.

The different styles of adult literacy tuition in the Riverina are a response to the realities of regional change and the financial constraints of government economic belt tightening. The formats of tuition also acknowledge the individuality of the learner's needs and the place of the student in their own community.

A Time of Change

At the time of writing, November 1989, it is clear that the past year has been a time of intense change in NSW education. The two Scott Reports have recommended wide alterations to the administrative structures of the Department of Education, Board of Adult Education and TAFE. It is difficult if not impossible to know where they fit into the amended educational world. Ethics, philosophy and work style are also under challenge, and it is perplexing for educators to know what their 'renewed' positions will entail; whether in fact they will still have a job; and for what aspect of education they will be responsible. Literacy education has not escaped the reorganising hand. It seems that adult literacy provision will fit under the expansive bureaucratic umbrella of TAFE COM, but managed independently by Adult and Community Education (ACE). Workplace literacy and technical literacy will also be accommodated here.

Before the Changes

Before the Scott induced changes, adult literacy education in the Riverina region was provided by TAFE, the Adult Education College - Riverina Region Inc (better known as the Adult Evening College), and by the Continuing Education Centre Albury-Wodonga Inc. These three organisations offered a wide range of literacy courses and enrolled students from all over the region. The range and variety of literacy courses represents a recognition of, and response to, the spectrum of conditions which exist in the Riverina. The remainder of this chapter will be spent discussing the anatomy of adult literacy services in the region, the distribution of the services, and the limitations of these provisions. The primary focus will be on adult literacy services rather than their present providers.

The Small and Isolated Country Town

Adult literacy services in the small and isolated towns of the Riverina are generally offered on a voluntary basis by local community members. Each 'cluster' of volunteer tutors is given a 'supervising' teacher. TAFE and the Continuing Education Centre of Albury-Wodonga have been responsible for recruiting and training volunteer tutors, and for ensuring that both the adult and the tutor are supported during their time together.

Margaret, a co-ordinator with the Second Chance Program explains the initial attractiveness which this program has for volunteers.

"Tutors often say that they just want to help somebody and it is often very vague. And often what is behind their approach is that they know somebody and they really want to help someone very specific. They want to find out how to do it properly."

The perceived strengths of this way of teaching literacy are that it has a *"...community base"* (Grant, A.N. 1987, p 104); the tutors have *"...an understanding of local characteristics"* (p 108); and it stresses sound teaching strategies such as demonstration and modelling (p 116). It is a process of *" ...considerable learning and growth for both students and tutors"* (p 138). Voluntary literacy tutoring is well suited to the Riverina region. The confidentiality of this service supposedly circumvents the need for poor readers and writers to expose themselves publicly to community criticism in small towns. No one but the student and the tutor need ever know.

Jenny, a tutor co-ordinator comments on why a lot of non readers and writers find individual teaching is their only choice.

"A lot of people who come to us wouldn't dream of going to a class situation. The person who is a virtual non reader would find it almost impossible to come along to a class situation, and that's why you offer one to one at that stage. You have to admit to yourself that you can't read and write before you can do anything else. You have to accept in yourself the reality of the problem."

The volunteer tutoring program means that people in small isolated towns are not forced to travel to find literacy tuition. It is critical when the geographic area to be covered is so great that people are available to satisfy the needs of the individual within the community. There are however many small towns which do not have an infrastructure of training and supervision in literacy. This is the result of the low profile of literacy in these communities, the lack of information about what sorts of services are available and the

negative community attitudes which mitigate against the recognition of literacy problems and the formulation of any solutions. A lot of small towns just miss out altogether. Unless there is a person or group who regards literacy as important and works towards the dissemination of this information, the literate life of the community goes on as it always has.

The solution to this problem cannot be imposed from the outside. There is a determined resistance to plans or ideas introduced by the expert coming in. The community's understanding of literacy and the consequent degree of acceptance and support which they offer to their less literate members will largely determine the success of any literacy initiative undertaken in the smaller town. Only higher levels of public information and a more sophisticated appreciation of reading and writing will strengthen the importance of being a literacy person in the small country towns of the Riverina. Once this pre-requisite has been satisfied the suitability of the volunteer tutoring program to the small town context will become more immediately obvious.

Once volunteer tutor programs have become established they offer a lot more than individualised instruction to both the student and the tutor. To assess the effectiveness of such programs simply by the number of 'clients' who are catered for is to overlook the essence of this enterprise. Volunteer programs come from communities and reflect the specificity and idiosyncrasies of these. They represent the intersection of demand and supply at the local level. These programs help to create an awareness of the importance of being literate, and legitimise the activities of reading and writing.

Audrey Grant, in describing a program in Victoria, says, *"In a real sense the local community neighbourhood area provides the essential ground for the planting and sustaining of this model of literacy provision. The program began in response to community initiatives, and continues to rely on the availability of local residents as volunteer tutors, and has become firmly established, as consciousness raising about literacy issues in the neighbourhood at large, and the related demand for provisions have increased."* (Grant, A. 1987, p 106)

The volunteer tutor program is a barefoot solution to a complex web of social, geographic and funding restrictions. Adults in towns such as Hillston, Cootamundra, Young, Batlow, Tumut, Deniliquin, Corowa and Finley are learning to be literate because of this program. With greater community acceptance of literacy problems, a more informed public and a higher level of bureaucratic and financial support, volunteer tutoring programs could extend their influence to the often overlooked smaller and more isolated townships of the Riverina region.

Deniliquin is a Riverina town which is neither small, in comparison to other settlements, or particularly isolated. However it is a town which can provide a model of how literacy needs can be recognised and responded to. In Deniliquin the enthusiasm and concern of a key community person were critical factors in the setting up of three literacy classes. A person who worked with new arrivals and town residents of non English speaking backgrounds recognised the need for language and literacy classes. In conjunction with the Adult Education College one Introductory English course and two English as a Second Language courses were created, staffed and filled with adult students. This project illustrates how a sensitive recognition of community needs, information about, and access to, funds can create literacy classes which are a direct response to the needs of the learners and their regional and social contexts. The cultural preference is for group learning rather than individual tuition.

In Thurgoona, a suburb of Albury, a literacy course for the residents of Guadeloupe House is offered. The classes in both locations range in size from three to eight, and in 1989 these courses were paid for by the NSW Board of Adult Education. In both these places somebody identified a literacy problem and found a solution. In the regional setting this is often how courses come into being. A community or a group, or an individual must identify and enunciate the problem before anything resembling a solution can be found. There is no time, money or personnel to provide in-depth literacy market research. There is no umbrella organisation with the brief of looking after and planning for the literacy requirements of the region. The Regional Council of Adult Education monitors literacy activities but has little government support to do more. It is not itself a provider. The Regional Adult Education Officer with the Regional Council travels extensively and often puts groups of people in touch with possible sources of funds. The co-ordinating and collating role of the Regional Adult Education Officer provides valuable information to the organisations which are offering literacy services within the Riverina. Information is also passed onto the Regional Council members who represent all the major educational groups in the Riverina. Policy is therefore informed by regional perspectives.

Within the Riverina the structure and style of operation of the Adult Education College is such that it has the potential to make a much greater impact in the area of adult literacy. Administratively it has centres in Wagga Wagga, Deniliquin, Corowa, Hillston, Hay, Barham, Gundagai, Junee, The Rock and Tumut. In 1990 the number of these centres will be increased to include Narrandera and Leeton with the possibility of additional centres being set up in Cootamundra, Holbrook and Lockhart.

Each centre has a part-time co-ordinator who must at least have a telephone and an office as basic operating equipment. The Adult Education College has an" ... *energetic, independent network of community based programs.*" (Scott Report - TAFE Restructuring, September 1989, p 21)

The College has a reputation for responding quickly and flexibly to community needs. With a slight shift in emphasis these qualities could be directed to the proliferation of adult literacy offerings. The conflict of interests comes when the question of funding is raised. The expectation that the Adult Education College will generate the greater part of its income through fees is firmly entrenched as a piece of doctrine. High performance courses running in the major urban centres bring in the money. The pressure to offer courses which will cover the bulk of the costs of running them is clear. It is a question of ethics and philosophy and politics as to whether people should be charged at a 'cost covering' rate for the privilege of becoming literate.

The other problem which faces the Adult Education College is that there is little money, and therefore time, available to consult with the communities of the smaller towns, to monitor their educational needs and prepare courses which specifically meet those needs. Given the clandestine nature of most adult reading and writing problems, the task of uncovering and responding to human needs is not one that can be accomplished quickly or easily. However in 1989 the Adult Education College was given a grant to develop literacy programs in the region.

The Urban Centre

The Riverina has two major urban centres - Albury-Wodonga which it shares with Victoria, and Wagga Wagga. These cities have an economic life of their own and are self-sustaining. Services tend to concentrate in these centres, and the educational facilities

which they advertise are varied and characteristically urban. They offer every conceivable form of educational opportunity to students from pre-school to university.

In this educational environment literacy tuition appears in different formats and combinations. It is available in basic courses which stand alone or as part of courses with a wider focus. They range from informal to formal offerings.

Formal classes aimed at varying levels of literacy proficiency are offered on the TAFE campuses. Refresher English attracts people from TAFE who need to upgrade their literacy levels to cope with the reading and writing demands of the course of study they are enrolled in. English for Further Studies is designed to accommodate the literacy needs of those students who are completing their HSC or Matriculation or who are preparing for Tertiary study. Students can graduate from TAFE with a Certificate of General Education which is equivalent to a Year 10 level in a traditional school setting.

Students can also enrol in a Certificate of Basic Education which provides literacy and numeracy classes for 20 hours per week for 18 weeks. Reading and Writing for Adults (RAWFA) is a non certificated course which caters to the specific and articulated literacy needs of adults in the community. Students attend twice a week for three hours and there is no time limit on the length of their stay in the course.

There is a very clear sense amongst the adult literacy staff at TAFE that different students will be helped in different formats. One of the strengths of the TAFE literacy provision is the level of staff training which is reflected in the nurturing attitudes towards all literacy students. The organisational infrastructure of TAFE, the support which it offers to its tutors and the access which it has to professional information, all ensure that the standard of literacy teaching is sensitively matched to the needs and competencies of their students.

In the urban setting a range of literacy options are available to the beginning reading and writer. TAFE educators appreciate that if a student starts their literate career in one context, they often build up enough confidence to move onto a group situation. For this reason in the urban centres volunteer tutoring programs are offered in parallel with the more formal classroom literacy courses.

For the confirmed non reader and writer, the person who didn't learn to read and write at school and still can't, participating in a CLASS conducted in a SCHOOL building is not a choice. Both parts of the learning equation - classes and schools - are identified with failure and frustration. The potential student is not likely to preserve the courage to go through with the first encounter. The literate world often underestimates the amount of personal strength that it takes to admit the problem of low literacy, and then to begin to do something about it. Motivation can often be assassinated on the steps of a daunting grey cement building.

Individualised instruction in a neutral or friendly setting is the most appropriate response to the student's needs. For the reluctant and frightened students, one to one tutoring ensures that the learning environment is well insulated against the intruding memories of school or unsuccessful learning. TAFE literacy co-ordinators oversee this program in the urban areas in much the same way as they do in the smaller country centres.

Sue, a TAFE teacher describes the courage which is needed to admit the problem of poor reading and writing and then how much time and gentleness must be extended to the person who is trying to come to terms with their problems and their solution -

"I did a radio interview and no sooner had I put the phone down than this fellow rang in and said he was very interested in what I had to say. He wasn't going to do it, he didn't have any problems, but he was very interested. And he would like to know how the program went. And the next week he rang me again to ask it if was still going. And he was still very interested. And this went on for weeks and weeks. He would do that, phone in once a week for a whole term, to ask if it was still going. Then one day this fellow came in, and they rang me from the office. They said that there was someone there to see me. I knew who it was before I went out. When I got there he said, 'You don't know who I am'. And I thought , 'Oh yes I do.' He came as a student then. Some ideas take a long time to percolate through before people feel confident enough to do something about a problem or a worry. I've had other students who say, 'I've thought about this for three years.'"

Just as TAFE provides literacy tuition in different formats in the city setting, the Continuing Education Centre also offers a wide range of services and courses in the Albury-Wodonga growth centre. It receives financial assistance from Victoria where the funding for Adult Education is considerably higher than in NSW. As one disgruntled course co-ordinator commented, *"Victoria does not think that Adult Education has to be run on a budget of an old shoe lace and a bit of string."*

In this urban and financially more comfortable context the Continuing Education Centre offers a number of literacy courses. One to one tuition is available through the Second Chance program. *"Tutor training workshops are held at the Centre each term to provide volunteer tutors with some understanding of the kinds of problems faced by an adult non reader, an understanding of some of the factors which may have inhibited the learning in the first place and various strategies for assisting the adult learner to become successful in developing these vital skills."* (Continuing Education Centre - Report p 30) Small group classes are also held. Two workplace literacy programs are operating, one on each side of the river. Literacy is also offered as a component of some courses run in Neighbourhood Houses in and around the Albury district.

The mobile child care unit .... *" ... a primary factor in access to community education programs"* (Continuing Education Centre - Report p 28) supports a number of these literacy courses by providing the adult learners with immediate on site care of their young children.

The adult literacy offerings in Albury-Wodonga area respond to the variety of needs which poor readers and writers express. The spectrum of literacy choices confronting the individual implies that the status of the learners, their locations, their mobility and their social settings have been considered carefully by those people responsible for adult education in this part of the region.

In the Riverina region as a whole the adult literacy offerings are varied, and represent the attempts by different organisations to respond sensitively and thoughtfully to the needs of adult learners. The impact of these responses are mediated by the inadequate staffing levels given the size of the region, the inherently low levels of general community information about literacy, and shoestring budgets. Literacy educators work in the urban context and in the industrial complexes that grow from them. They provide tuition to people in the small farming communities of the region and offer individualised assistance to those people either too isolated or reluctant to attend formal classes. The range of learning environments demands that teachers, co-ordinators and volunteer tutors are flexible, mobile and totally committed to the notion of literacy for everyone.

CHAPTER 5

FIGURING OUT LITERACY

"For Australia the goal of functional literacy in English is essential but not adequate. Literacy involves the integration of listening, speaking, reading, writing and critical thinking; it incorporates numeracy. It includes the cultural knowledge which enables a speaker, writer or reader to recognise and use language appropriate to different social situations. For an advanced technological society such as Australia, our goal must be an active literacy which allows people to use language to enhance their capacity to think, create and question, which helps them to become more aware of the world and empowers them to participate more effectively in society."

(Appendix A - International Literacy Year Paper Number 1)

This chapter deals with different definitions of literacy, and how these definitions affect the debate about the regional response to literacy needs.

Western society has a passion for numbers. The science of quantification is flourishing. A quick glance at the first few pages of the newspaper shows how often we refer to numbers to provide a numerical superstructure for information. Earthquake damage is assessed by counting the number of people dead and injured; the extent of the drug problem is judged by the number of police arrests; and the effectiveness of government monetary policy is monitored by falls in the current account deficit. Statistics, numbers and the act of quantification add a legitimacy and a comprehensibility to otherwise difficult pieces of information.

Any debate about standards of literacy in Australia generally opens with a heralding numerical statement, similar to this one, "Over one million Australia can't read and write". The immediate effects of such a numerical bombshell are clear. The media, the public, the politicians, the parent groups, the teachers' unions and other assorted representative organisations become locked into a set of arguments which are mounted more to apportion educational blame than to question either where these figures came from or to what sort of definition of literacy formed the basis for the data collection. The numbers are a convenient smoke screen. As long as the arguments vibrate around notions of external quantification the protagonists need not argue from anything other than personal interest and experience. In this context numbers serve to stultify debate rather than extend it. They polarise opinion and further downgrade the status of those people who are not proficient readers and writers.

Statistics create their own sense of security for their users. However even most number crunchers will admit that any statistic is only as useful as its interpretation. The assumptions which guide statistical collection and analysis can be very different and can produce widely differing conclusions. There is nothing sacrosanct about figures, they can be as much a reflection of the views and opinions of their user as any other piece of data, yet they are assumed to have an independent objectivity which is not necessarily supported by reality.

The statistics often quoted in relation to adult literacy standards in Australia are the results of a study conducted by Judy Goyen in 1977 (Goyen, J. 1977), in Sydney. Goyen

maintains that 3.7% of native English speaking people, and 55.8% of adult new arrivals from non English speaking backgrounds, are illiterate.

"Staff at the Adult Literacy Information Office may quote from one of their information sheets (eg. The ten questions most commonly asked about adult literacy) and estimate that 6% to 10% of people cannot function as literate adults. However, the basis for this estimate is questionable due to the absence of corroborating hard research data." (Black, S. p 2) Presumably some mixture of these two sets of figures allowed DEET to announce that 1 in 14 Australians can't read and write properly. If we translate this figure to the Riverina region, and it if is true that 17,857 people have difficulty reading and writing are we any further ahead? Do we know any more about adult literacy in the region? Do we know why people are reluctant to take up tuition? It seems that this figure of 1 in 14 contributes little to either the definition of the problem or its solutions.

It is important to know how many people have difficulty reading and writing, but it is equally important to collect these figures accurately. The expectation that urban data can be translated into rural regional terms is unrealistic.

The most recent document to publicly direct attention to the standard of adult literacy in Australia was published by the Department of Employment, Education and Training. The Morey Report addresses the issues of terminology and historical background before coming to terms with the statistical basis of adult literacy in Australia. The Morey Report (DEET, January 1989) is a Review of Adult Literacy Activities in Australia. "The review is intended to provide a background summary of the Commonwealth's involvement in the field of Adult Literacy." (Preface) The report establishes a very clear historical context for the Commonwealth's involvement and obvious interest in the area of adult literacy. It traces references to the effects of low levels of literacy in the Fitzgerald (1976) "Poverty Report" (p 4); the Federal Government's "Second Report on Needs in Technical and Further Education" (Richardson, 1975, p 4)' and the "Quality of Education in Australia" Report (1985, p4) Having examined these reports with their opinions and comments from "... a wide range of dedicated people involved in the field of adult literacy" (Preface) the Report maintains as one of its basic assumptions that "... the consequences of low or inadequate literacy are profound. It affects an individual's participation in employment, industry and society generally." (p 5)

The Morey Report addresses the issues of terminology and definition early in the report and rejects the concept of "illiteracy" on the grounds that it is "... erroneous and negative in connotation". (p11) The Report then cites comments by Grant (1985) which support the idea that literacy is more than the ability to merely 'function', "... it is an organic process inseparable from the way we live our lives." (Grant, 1985) (Morey Report, p 11)

Having offered these definitions the Report then moves on to try and quantify the extent of low or inadequate literacy levels in Australia by using precisely the tools of analysis which it had just criticised, namely the Goyen 1977 study and subsequent amendments based on English and non English speaking divisions within the sample. The Report then announces that "For Australia as a whole using the 1981 census, there would have been 818,000 non English background migrants and 371,000 native English speakers who cannot read telephone dialling instructions, classified housing and employment advertisements and simple application forms. There are then over a million functionally illiterate men and women in Australia." (p 12)

This statement is again qualified and the Goyen study comes in for scrutiny again. However the headlines have been heard, "ONE MILLION FUNCTIONALLY ILLITERATE MEN AND WOMEN IN AUSTRALIA." The subtleties of the qualifying

criticisms have appeared too late to influence those community opinions which are already responsible for so much of the social and political stigma that prevents individuals from participating in groups and classes.

The extent to which people participate in adult literacy tuition is also discussed and the review cites the work of Lynch and Richards (1984). They conclude that most people who ask for help and who are attending classes or are involved in one to one tutoring situations are people from the middle to higher socio-economic range. There is still a very large group of people who are, "... hidden among the under privileged" (Lynch and Richards, 1984 in Morey, p 12) who remain unwilling or unable to take advantage of any form of literacy tuition. This issue, which would appear to be one of the logical focal points of any study about the provision of adult literacy services, is not pursued any further.

That report then moves straight on to examine the different adult literacy programs funded directly or indirectly by the Commonwealth Government and concludes with a much more balanced set of guiding principles than those which appeared in the Preface to the document. The Commonwealth will continue to support one to one tutoring programs (p 36); labour market training programs typically do not achieve immediately observable results (p 36); and migrants may require literacy as well as English language tuition (p 36).

The Commonwealth's role in Adult Literacy and Adult Education is supported and determined by the changes which are taking place within Australian industry and which are the responsibility of the Federal government, "... the move towards industry restructuring and award structures which cover broader and more flexible skill groupings ... emphasises the opportunity that will need to be given to retraining and upgrading existing skills. Requirements for literacy as part of the broad range of skills required by the revised award structures, will clearly place demands on the existing provision for teaching adults basic skills." (p 37)

The significance of the issue of literacy is sharply focussed on the provision of a set of skills which will equip the worker to become a more flexible and productive employee, thereby creating a more satisfied and contributory individual. The logic of the equation is not necessarily as compelling or as simple as the Report would have us believe.

The Morey Report has tried to please everyone; those with an interest in the statistics of adult literacy; those concerned with tuition; those whose predominant concern is the productivity of the workforce; and those who are occupied with provisions of equity and opportunity. As a consequence some of the more basic and controversial arguments about literacy are omitted, or referred to only obliquely.

If we are going to appreciate the character of adult literacy in the Riverina and then recommend directions in which we might go to find solutions to the problems confronted by those people who need tuition but don't want it, then we must come to terms with some of these established arguments and controversies. We must have a clear sense of what literacy is, why it is important, and how the language which we use determines the way we think about this issue.

The term LITERACY has a linguistic status like WEALTH and HEALTH. These words are difficult to define because of their implicit relativity - "healthy - compared to what?", "wealthy - compared to whom?", "literate - by whose standards?" Their antonyms carry with them connotations of failure; the status of patient or victim; welfare recipient and general social disability. The extent to which those possessing the attribute have the right to define the qualities of that same attribute for everyone else is questionable. In the area

of literacy definition this is exactly what happens. When we talk of 'illiteracy', those who are literate are claiming for themselves something that another group of people doesn't have. We are categorising people, giving them a role which they do not deserve. We are implying the loss of something, a disability, an illness. The illiterate is by definition a loser. The society assumes that everyone either does or should read and write proficiently and the pressure created by such attitudes is a force which prevents many people from taking advantage of literacy tuition.

Rather than looking at literacy in terms of an enumerated set skills, or as the ability to complete a discrete set of word tasks, it is more helpful to look at how and why people use their literate capacities. In this way all the different forms of literacy can be acknowledged. The needs of individuals and the literacy demands placed on them vary immensely across populations and contexts, and are likely to change over time. It is intellectually parsimonious to expect that the literate capacity required by a steelworker or a young mother or a farm hand can be definitively listed, quantified and taught. Each individual will have different interests and different literacy needs, and any definition should begin with the person rather than the skills. 'Functional' definitions of literacy and 'workplace' definitions of literacy begin with the presumption that there are in fact a discrete set of skills which can and should be taught. When people do not have these skills they are costing the community money.

The concept of workplace literacy has been developed in response to the credible notion that the literacy demands of the workplace are growing at a rapid rate and that unemployment or redundancy due to low or inadequate literacy standards is preventable. The language used in the Morey Report to outline the need for workplace literacy clearly reflects the shift in emphasis away from the learner and towards the welfare of the economy. "With the increased pace and scope of change associated with economic restructuring and the demographic fact that the supply of students and entrants to the labour market will decline sharply in the 1990's, adult education in general and adult literacy in particular is seen as an essential strategy for Australia's future." (AAAE, 1988, p 5) Some of the more specific effects of low levels of literacy amongst employees are articulated, and poor readers and writers are held partly responsible for this expensive set of economic ills. Low or inadequate levels of literacy amongst employees reduce economic growth, increase the welfare bill, impede developments towards productivity, increase unemployment and their children need special reading and writing tuition. There is little room for the individual learner in this paradigm.

Many public discussions of literacy centre on the notion of 'functional literacy' which "represents the identification of a common set of literacy skills which one could argue, represents the effective functioning in society (albeit at a rather basic level)." (Black, S. 1988, p 2). The extent to which the individual can read the phone book or deal with tax exemption forms or manage a bus timetable are the concerns of the researchers measuring the number of functionally literate people in any population. Whilst these are important skills to have they focus only on the physical survival of the individual. Their definition of literacy is narrow.

However, their appeal is clear. The tests are easily constructed and administered; they can be divided into sub tests and sections to allow for finer analysis; they can be marked by computer and scored with numerical ease. Responses are either right or wrong and all that we know about language learning and the subsequent development of reading and writing is discounted. The fact that human learning is characterised by approximations, guesses, predictions, confirmations or refutations, and a final extraction of meaning, has no place within this framework. Functionalism is a doctrine which discounts the processes involved in the gradual attainment of fluency in any human learning experience.

Functional measures of literacy also allow populations to be ranked. They offer concrete measures which ostensibly suggest options for improvement and possible directions for remediation. They are neat packages of information all tied up with quotable statistics. The lend themselves to mechanistic interpretations of accountability. The statistics and the language used to interpret the statistics often disguise the fact that there are real people with real lives behind the words. "Cross subsidisation", "access to services", "debriefing sessions", "networking", "outreaching capacities", "funding constraints' and "service delivery" are the terms which are sometimes used by educational managers in response to the problems of adult literacy education. The words salve our consciences, distance our souls and frequently lead to the mechanistic resolution of individual human issues.

Some teaching strategies, and the content of some programs designed to raise the level of functional literacy in the community, focus on decoding the details of existence. The assumption is that by being taught to fill in the dole form or the Medicare claim form as the primary thrust of instruction, that this will lead to greater social participation and an improved quality of life for the learner. If these details are the only rationale for literacy instruction then we have failed our students dismally.

Functional and workplace definitions of literacy take no account of the social, economic, or cultural environment of the individual. These cannot be quantified, only described. Each individual's literate context is different, the demands of that context are different and the way in which individuals respond to these demands are different. No amount of list making or standardised testing will provide us with this calibre of information. To go beyond such measures and definitions is to accept that literacy and literature can contribute to an individual's life by expanding that person's concept of themselves in relation to the rest of the world. The acceptance of this broader definition of literacy implies that teachers need to constantly monitor their teaching and regard literacy learning as a collaborative rather than didactic process. The research and literature which now informs the teaching of speaking, listening, reading and writing is sufficiently convincing to force us to accept the ideas of student centred learning. The applicability of this information is even more critical given the horrific learning experiences which most adult students bring with them.

Functional considerations of literacy are socially comfortable and politically unchallenging. The arguments which surround the relationship between literacy and empowerment are neither. At the basis of the relationship is the idea that the consequences of learning must never be under estimated. Once something has been learnt it changes the individual's personal, social and political world in some way. The question then becomes; how much responsibility must literacy educators assume for introducing people to the world of literacy and the power that it attracts? If literacy educators believe that the responsibility is primarily theirs, then this political philosophy will be expressed in terms of actively encouraging people to take up the offers of literacy tuition rather than waiting for the students to approach them.

The critical questions for literacy educators are firstly: can the rhetoric of empowerment become the motivating force behind institutional action? and secondly: will those people, on whose behalf the rhetoric has been delivered, see the practical translations of that language into action?

All the considerations discussed can be directed towards the study of adult literacy education in the Riverina region in that:

Any study of adult literacy must encompass the individual in their environment.

The reasons why people may not take up the offer of literacy tuition are as complex as the idea of literacy itself.

The definition of literacy that we accept determines the way in which we think about the problem of literacy in the region. It can be broadly based on the complex set of relationships which a person has with the society around them or it can be confined to a numerical assessment of potential customers.

The perspectives developed in the following chapters help to explain the reluctance of people to take advantage of literacy classes. It is definitely Riverina in flavour, but the issues discussed are universal.

CHAPTER 6

INTO PERSPECTIVE

This chapter provides the rationale for the perspectives developed in the four subsequent chapters.

To begin a discussion of adult literacy is to begin a journey through a variety of paradoxical landscapes. We who are highly literate accept the need to be so if we are to be widely involved in our society. As a consequence the 'illiterate' is type cast as a dependent, unsatisfied and unsuccessful person and yet we know and publicise the success stories of non readers and writers who have made it through to become millionaires or actors or business people.

The rhetoric of adult educators suggests that disadvantage accompanies low levels of literacy and that literacy socially divides the members of our world as clearly and as distinctly as any measure of social status. We discuss in emotive and passionate terms the plight of the non reader and the non writer - their relegation to low skilled employment, low wages and low socio economic status. We explore in detail the relationship between crime rates and low literacy levels, poor health care and low literacy levels, agricultural accidents with herbicides and low literacy levels. We point to the constant changes in education. We peer into schools and try to understand what they do. We are mystified as to why children still 'get through' without being able to read and write. We advocate either a highly polished skills program for our non readers and writers, that will equip them to respond to employment structures which they may just wish to bypass, or we speak of literacy as a source of political empowerment which frees individuals to exercise of their political, social and cultural rights.

The pendulum of discourse and debate swings back and forth, risking the failure of identifying real needs, real aspirations and real opportunities for teaching and learning.

There is a prevailing set of attitudes at present which focus on the apparently quantifiable aspects of learning and education. The 'economic speak' is dominated by terms such as 'output', 'productivity', 'assessment'. One administrator who has absorbed the flavour of the language said, *"Adult education has to become more entreprenurial and directed towards more economic and skills oriented subjects with quantifiable educational outcomes"*. Along with such a perspective on education comes the passion for quantification, a passion which balances the books but which risks bypassing the needs of 'the market'. Accountability is a legitimate demand to place on any educational undertaking, but its value becomes overrated when it is discussed in purely quantitative terms. Finding solutions to educational problems in an era of economic rationalism requires us to mix data from a variety of sources and informants.

We know that productivity, profitability and cost effectiveness are not necessarily the ultimate or best measures for providing educational guidance to those in authority. They don't provide the most informed framework for investigation or analysis because they deny the social, political, geographic and economic contexts in which people, the clients and the teachers, live. These are the determinants of individual responses to educational provision. To deny the importance of the context in which education occurs is to ensure that the educational initiative will fail to reach a proportion of the intended population. The Adult

Literacy Council of NSW estimates that 5% of adults who could benefit from literacy tuition are enrolled in classes. It has been this way for many years. For it to be any different requires a new conceptualisation of the issues and a qualitatively fresh approach to solving the problem.

This study presents people in their contexts and takes notice of their accumulated stores of knowledge, experience and expertise. The synthesis of this pool of information along with statistical and bibliographical insight builds the picture of adult literacy in the region.

A broad set of perspectives on adult literacy in the Riverina can be obtained by cross referencing information collected from a variety of sources in the community. Teachers, key community figures, students of literacy classes and people who regard themselves as not being proficient, and who do not enrol in literacy tuition classes, provide a rich source of data. Add to these the results of research and thought produced by others in other places and we begin to define the parameters and extremities of the concern.

This section is all about putting together these anecdotes, comments research results and statistics. There is often common ground; ideas and opinions overlap and fall into neatly referenced patterns. They are a writer's dream; different viewpoints feeding into a central theme or question. There are also those totally untidy dimensions to the study: ideas, thoughts and results that don't fit, that don't appear to make sense. These are the fascinating contradictory aspects of adult literacy that equally deserve accommodation and explanation. We have sets of conventional wisdoms which are expressed by people everywhere. These perspectives are brimming over with a sense of applicability to other places and contexts. There are also some specifically Riverina dimensions to the perspectives on adult literacy explored here.

The perspective which is reviewed first is the relationship between education and literacy. This perspective is captured colloquially by the term "BOOK LEARNIN".

CHAPTER 7

BOOK LEARNIN'

A person's formal educational history not only influences their proficiency but also colours their attitudes towards formal and institutional learning. This chapter details some of the connections between school and learning later in life.

For many of us formal education dominated a considerable part of our youth. It provided us with training, friends and a storehouse of impressions and memories. These determined our attitudes towards later institutional learning. Some of us fitted the school mould well. Our social edges were soft enough to accommodate the rules, and our ethical backgrounds matched those which dominated school based instruction. Others of us did not fit so well. Irrelevant material was reinforced by forms of discipline which soured our taste for any type of further learning beyond the levels of compulsory school attendance, and in some cases we did not even tolerate these. For those who withstood the rigours of formal education and training, the rewards were a "good job" and a guaranteed place amongst the middle to upper classes. Life was sometimes less gentle on those who "left early".

Some of us learnt what school had to teach, and others did not. Some of us became literate individuals equipped with the skills to read, write and talk in different codes in a host of contexts and situations. Some of us did not become proficient readers and writers. We could not make sense of the tasks and exercises which were the basis of our literacy instruction. We did not make "progress". We did not keep pace with the rest of the class. We fell behind. We had little interest in school and learning. We were told frequently and in a thousand subtle ways that we were the failures. Eventually we believed it to be true. The strength of this sense of failure and embarrassment and its persistence as a dominating attitude in the minds of particular people is reflected by Linda's observation of one of her first literacy students -

"When I was running the remedial clinic a student came in and he was looking for a book. He came across one of the old primers, 'We Go For a Picnic' or something it was called. It was a thick one with those little jerky sentences, it had absolutely no meaning: 'The boy had a dog, the dog's name was something. The terrier was black. It had a white tail'. All sorts of uninteresting things. It was quite a thick one and he decided that he was going to borrow it, and he said, 'I'm going to take that'. And I said, 'Oh but Sam it's not interesting. Why don't you get one with a real story?' 'No', he said, 'When I was in Grade 2 all the other kids could read this and I couldn't. And I used to sit in the back of the classroom and when it was my turn to read I used to hide under the desk. I'm going to read it.' And he took it and he got through every page."

Patricia, a student in an adult literacy class describes how her inability to cope with the demands of school relegated her to the 'dumb' category. She is still fighting the side effects of such labelling today -

"Well I hated going to school 'cause when I did go my teachers used to look at me strangely and say to me in front of all the class how dumb I was. They used to throw

things at us for not doing things the way we were told ... I just felt like I shouldn't be there. I used to be really scared to go (to school) so I used to just pretend I was sick all the time. I found that putting powder on your face and going to bed real early at night really helps. So when we come here I was told that my mother had to come up to the school because my Form Master stood me in the corner and told me how dumb I was, and how I couldn't come back again cause I couldn't learn anything. It was embarrassing because it was in front of all the class."

Patricia regards herself as a poor reader and writer who is only now beginning to develop confidence in her capacity to learn anything.

Many adults who have attended school carry with them the legacy of that experience. The legacy can help account for their subsequent learning or their resistance to it. The level of fear associated with returning to literacy classes in a building which strongly resembles a school is described by a number of TAFE students who have overcome their terror. Sue, a teenage mother of two children says of her first encounter with the architecture -

"First coming here, you think: 'Oh God, it looks like jail, there's too many windows and you get lost.' I first come in here and I thought: 'How awful. It looks like a big school.' It reminded me of High School so I was really scared .... it's horrible."

John, a sensitive and competent administrator from the Department of Education also recognises the anxiety and fear that can be created in some people's minds by the mere whiff of the word 'school' -

"For some parents, those with reading and writing difficulties, those who failed themselves at school and who were probably belted for that failure, schools pong. In terms of the olfactory nerve they have a particular smell and that smell is a combination of the government polish and the methylated spirits from the duplicating machine. And there is a particular odour and it permeates schools that have done away with duplicating machines a hundred years ago. That very odour is enough to turn people away from schools.

Tiny details, remnants of school experiences, cause apparently insurmountable problems for some students. They are frequently juxtaposed with more prominent concerns as Wendy, a literacy student, reflects -

"There's another point about the Tech College itself, a lot of people don't know what's involved with cost, books or anything else. That's an important worry. When you come into the situation you don't know what you're landing yourself in. And you don't know what you should be bringing with yourself. You don't know if you should be having books already, or what coloured pens you should buy. The stupidest things people put through their head at the first moment. It makes you feel like school and you've got to be ready..."

Margaret, a TAFE teacher found a solution to the problem of potential adult literacy students equating and identifying the College with a flood of negative, historical experiences of school. She transferred her class to the library, thereby overcoming one of the hurdles which students would otherwise have to negotiate. She also provided transport for them -

"I had a group of teenage girls .... all mothers, and they were really worried about coming up to the TAFE and so we used to meet at the Library. We asked for a room there. And they had transport problems and we used to get neighbours to mind their kids, and I used

to go and pick them all up and take them home, rather than doing it at a person's place because the telephone would ring or the kids would cry, or someone would come in. The neutral spot was quite good."

Another response to the problems caused by the daunting structures of TAFE and their emotional associations in the minds of students has been developed by Greta -

"Last year we had classes in Neighbourhood Centres. They are certainly a less threatening place for people to go initially. Sometimes it is just a matter of getting people there in the first place. They can meet the teacher involved and have a taste and then it's not so difficult to graduate to TAFE."

Sarah, an Adult Literacy Coordinator in Albury has been responsible for integrating basic mathematics and literacy courses into subjects being run at three Neighbourhood Houses. By offering these courses within the security of a known environment and by serving them up in a palatable form she thinks that a number of the problems have been solved -

"Each Neighbourhood House ran a different type of session, and the people doing the Stretch Sewing one and the Patchwork Quilt course found that there was so much measuring that they asked for some extra help with their Maths. There is also another course which is running which is to do with personal development and that is going to get people interested who have a lot of resistance to learning and who also lived in an underprivileged area. The mobile child care services also committed some of their time to providing child care during those session."

In some people's minds school and education are all about getting things 'wrong'. Reading, spelling, writing and handwriting were assessed in terms of ticks, crosses and red lines through inappropriate or clumsy expressions. For those of us who had far more crosses than ticks, who rarely received praise or merit certificates, who had to copy out endless lists of meaningless spelling words, a return to literacy classes in adult life represent a return to a form of voluntary torture. Robin who has just recently established two successful workplace literacy projects in Albury-Wodonga comments on the attitudes of a number of her students -

"One thing I've found through running these groups is the number of misconceptions that people have about being a good reader or writer, and they are one of the first barriers that we try to break down. It is probably from their school background where everything is seen as right or wrong. The way composition work used to be marked - not looking at what you write but the number of spelling mistakes. Whether you had the fullstops in the right place."

A lack of personal confidence is a theme which runs through these comments. The red pen legacy of school, the sense of failure induced by intermittent attendance, or simply the fact that the school and the student were not in step with one another can account for the attitude of reluctance which many adults express towards returning to any form of institutional learning. Colleges, classes and TAFE are bundled together and classified as places, *" ... where all those bright people go."*

Commentaries such as these reflect the huge distances which can exist between ideas of what is being taught and the realities of what is being learnt. These discrepancies, the fact that people have passed through the school system without adequate literacy skills, account for comments such as, "What are teachers doing in school? Why aren't they teaching all children to read and write?" This rhetoric fuels the debate on falling standards and is used

to justify the sometimes hysterical calls for a return the *'basics'*. However such solutions are simplistic and are likely only to promote a sense of failure rather than dispose of it. The community in general, and the school in particular, must appreciate more intensely that the creation of an early sense continues. John from the Department of Education expresses community concerns about the literate status of our population. He also accepts that the responsibility for reluctant adult learners must lie with the school -

"Those children, mostly boys, who aren't successful early and who experience and internalise that failure create enormous problems for themselves and for everyone else. They are the sorts of people who society ultimately looks at when they are 20 and they say that the school has failed. The school has failed. There can be no equivocation about that."

These viewpoints are strengthened by the voices of people who have not learnt to read and write. They feel that school gave them little while robbing them of their confidence.

The discrepancy between what is taught and what is learnt is a continuing tension for all educators and students. Children can become excluded from the learning environment, their individual needs remaining unacknowledged and punitively different from that of their peers. A narrow definition of **what** is to be learnt and **when**, can fail to acknowledge the individual differences which exist in any situation.

"To come up with one prescription that will guarantee success in learning for people with different interests and different attributes and different backgrounds is beyond me."

One of the side effects of not matching the activities of teaching and learning is the creation of a disabled student. One teacher comments that, *"This happened with a lot of children that I taught. They just weren't ready when the teacher said that they should be and they missed out and they got all these complexes."* If the different styles of learning and the variety of intellectual and social backgrounds have not been accommodated by the school system then it is inevitable that a certain proportion of children *"are just turned off learning"*. They remain turned off in adulthood, and their impressions and memories of school determine that they will have no further involvement in formalised education.

Jenny, a student in a literacy class, recommends that if the community wants to attract more people who have reading and writing problems into classes, then the images of unsuccessful schooling have to be exorcised first before any subsequent learning can take place -

"Let them know that it is nothing like school. You have your own free will .... to do what you want to do, learn what you want to learn and have your own say. This is the most important thing. You are treated as a friend ... They're not teachers, they're friends."

The general reticence on the part of people who need literacy help to seek it out in an institutionalised setting is acknowledged very clearly by TAFE teachers and the one to one volunteer tutoring program is a direct response to these pathologies. However, once in classes for adults at TAFE the students quickly find that their worst fears about the institutionalised setting are disposed of. It is the clearly expressed intention of the Literacy staff at TAFE, that the students themselves should determine and articulate their needs and that negotiation rather than imposition is the predominating ethic. Lyn a tutor co-ordinator with TAFE talks about how this is achieved -

"We are learning partners. We stress that the student has a lot to bring to the partnership, and the student has control all the time over what they want to learn."

The individual's place in history also has an effect on their educational background and their perceptions of the value of being a literate person. At Maybury, a small isolated country town in the west of the Riverina region, the practice was that, *"towards the end of the War people left school early because jobs were easy to get. In those days you could leave without any worries and the literacy level of people in this age group in this town is zilch. They can read and write, but a very low level."* The choice between school and full time lucrative post war employment was not hard to make.

When the economic climate changed and the post war boom gave way to the belt tightening associated with recession, employment suddenly became less available. Simultaneously the accelerating application of technology to all aspects of industry, commerce and agriculture meant that skill rather than just labour was the prerequisite for employment. Some people found it difficult or impossible to re-enter the world of formal education. The discrepancy between their literate capacities and those demanded by formal training courses was too large to even contemplate. One small town resident maintains that many of her peers sank back into a complacent and sometimes economically marginal life.

"The people themselves were not concerned. It's their way of life, they don't know any better. Anyway they've never had the opportunity. They're quite happy the way they live. And see it hasn't affected them in any way because they've been able to get a job washing or cleaning or on the farm - they don't have to use literacy skills. Therefore they can get by, and most of them are on the pension now anyway, so we don't have to worry. That's just their outlook. They have no aspirations, no ambitions to be anything."

John confirms the attractiveness of leaving school early but being a younger community member he is also cautious about his status. He accepts his low level of literacy but unlike the older residents of the town he acknowledges the increasingly important role which literacy occupies in every sphere of employment -

"It will eventually get harder and harder to get a job. You've got to have that little piece of paper. I've got a crane chaser's licence, a forklift ticket, a front end loader ticket. Even got a back hoe ticket. The fork lift ticket says that you must be able to read English. Well I got away with that one but it is one that will eventually come in really hard."

Some adults who regard themselves as poor readers and writers have patterns of school attendance which were irregular. Frequent bouts of illness, hospitalisation, domestic demands, and the pursuit of itinerant employment meant that school as a consistent activity had a low priority. Michael talks of his prolonged hospitalisation and how difficult it was for him to fit back into the structure of school. He feels that his illness and his shy nature meant that he was ignored -

"I was shoved in the back of the classroom and no one took any notice of me."

Mary links her fitful school attendance to her inability to read and write. She spent much of her youth on the family farm look after a chronically ill mother and her four siblings and father. Her shyness became pathological. She suffers from acute agoraphobia and her attendance at TAFE has been her first experience of social contact for many years -

"I had a very sick mother and a family to look after. First of all I was sick, so I didn't start school until I was 8 years old, and then I only went a few days a year. Then my mother got very sick and so there was four years of just staying home and looking after the family.

I used to run away to school when I was tired of looking after the family, and then I'd get a belting for doing it. I wanted to go to school, and I've got this feeling all the time that perhaps if I had had more schooling I would have been better educated. I still find it hard now coming here. Spelling and reading is still a difficult point with me."

Mary still tussles with the residual problems of low self esteem, lack of confidence and a low literacy level. The three facets of her problem grew up together and her TAFE literacy teachers who recognise this, address not only what is learnt, but how it is learnt. It is impossible to separate learners from their past educational and emotional histories. *"Flexibility, sensitivity and being a good listener are some of the teaching principles that guide our courses in Literacy at TAFE. There are such a lot of agencies that will take over people's lives unless they are listened to."*

Sarah, an Adult Literacy co-ordinator who works in this region, spoke about how a person's perceptions of their literate capacities, their ability to do anything about their literate status, and their worth as an individual can be determined by the amount of formal education. Lack of schooling certainly exerted an energetic influence on this person's subsequent life -

"We had a lady in our program some time ago who was hospitalised as a youngster, before there was any schooling in hospitals. She couldn't read and write. We did a Scope Radio program about not being able to read and write and she came on it and talked about the problems that she had. The interviewer said, 'How did you get over not being able to read and write?' She said, 'Oh that was easy. I just never went anywhere.' She has a very bad leg as a result of her illness and that was her excuse. She said that, 'You couldn't go out anywhere where there were other people, in case they would ask you something that you didn't know and you'd feel stupid. Actually she could read a little because as a youngster she liked reading before she got sick. She progressed very quickly in the course. She is now tutoring with some of the people from the hospital. She reads beautifully. She goes to School for Seniors and she is on their committee. I don't think literacy is just about being able to read a book. It is a whole way of life."

The clarity and tenacity of the relationship between educational history, literacy and subsequent adult education is obvious. The complex interactions between these might continue to keep the adult non reader and writer in a static situation. Robin who has recently been responsible for organising literacy classes in two workplaces recognises the pattern and the destructive effects that it has on an individual's perceptions of their capacity to learn -

"There are huge differences obviously in any group but they have got certain things in common. They have left school before they are fifteen, they have pretty negative school experiences, and little or no experience of adult education. They don't regard themselves as learners. Many of them have been through school remedial programs and have had family members try to help them in a well intentioned way, but without getting any results. And so their conclusion is that, 'I can't do it - my brain is not cut out for this sort of thing."

The trails explored so far point to a clear set of relationships between educational experience, literacy levels and the capacity and inclination of individuals to return to literacy classes. These relationships are not confined only to this region. They are the social contexts for learning and they describe the factors which can influence the process of adults learning to read and write in a host of different places. However there are a number of instances where the strength and nature of the relationship between education and literacy are characteristically 'Riverina'.

Firstly, nothing in the personality of the region does anything to soften the negative attitudes about formal education that have been built up in the minds of people who are poor readers and writers. There is certainly little community encouragement offered to people to upgrade their literacy skills, and there is even less public information about the problems which confront individuals who have inadequate literacy skills -

"People just don't know and I don't think that they even care if you can't read and write."

Sue, a student in a literacy class whose past educational experience influenced her attitude to literacy tuition for a long time now takes on the commercial world in Wagga Wagga as her personal mission. She thinks that public information is one of the only ways to overcome the community's stigmatising of poor readers and writers, and she is deliberately taking commercial organisations to task in a voluble way -

"When it comes to disability, you find that you get yourself that far down. You've got to get yourself up and the only way to do it is to stand on your own two feet and tell 'em. So when I go into an office now, I tell them that I'm doing a course and that I am doing reading. 'You fill out the bloody form it's got nothing to do with me.' Get up there and tell 'em what you think of them. I don't get scared no more. The way they use words and the way they pronounce words. It's absolutely ridiculous."

There is an attitude in the Riverina that physical labour is the natural employment status, anything other than this is regarded as a *'bit of a bludge'*. The sanctity of rural enterprise has predominated long after its economic power has been replaced by the contributions of other industrial sectors. These ideas have percolated into other workplaces in the Riverina. This attitude gives rise to the idea expressed by one student that *'unless you are actually at your work station or at your machine you are not really working.'* This actively discourages education in any shape or form. The person who cannot read and write has to contend with resistance to learning before they can begin to come to terms with idea of returning to an educational context for literacy tuition.

The opportunities for non-attendance at school and the reasons for it in the Riverina are many. Boarder hopping is quite a well known activity around Deniliquin. The town's closeness to Victoria means that itinerant workers or wanderers and their families can avoid the responsibilities of compulsory education by changing states. Lyn a co-ordinator with the TAFE "Outreach" program describes how and why this activity works -

"You find this up and down the river here. Once FACS, or whoever, starts homing in on you in NSW, then you take your sheep across the boarder into Victoria and then you have a good leeway before FACS or whoever catch up with you down there. And then you can just nip back up the river and across again. There is a lot of that so they can systematically miss out on being enrolled in any school system."

The priorities of the farming year have also often determined the attendance patterns of children in school. If farming is the real work of the family, then school will be subservient to the rhythms of the farming. Non-attendance is endorsed. It is much more important to lend a hand when harvest is on than to go to school. In the past such voluntary absences from school have led onto full or part time employment. People simply did not return to school. Robert, a 40 year old council employee, describes his feelings of confidence when he left school. The questions of unemployment and social security payments were not asked. The rural economy was sufficiently buoyant and diverse to allow any person who was physically fit to get a job with a good wage -

"See I left school when I was in sixth class. I wasn't doing any good so I just left. It was a total loss actually. I went away to boarding school when I was 7 and that was to straighten me out. It didn't work either."

Robert moved quickly into the hay, fencing and general farm labouring. He made good money. There was little need or inclination to learn to read and write.

In the Riverina the extent to which an individual's school experiences dominate their subsequent passion for learning is circumscribed by an overall set of rural attitudes towards education. This attitude in turn influences the way in which some members of the rural community view the activities of reading and writing and the value which they attach to literacy tuition. Geoff Lawrence (July 1987), in his study of the society of rural areas, points out that with the decline in farm outcomes the expectation of individual contribution to the farm enterprise grows. Labour rather than learning is seen as being the farmer's salvation. Education in this context is not particularly valuable. It represents an interruption to the farming activities - the real business of the day. It is seen as having little relevance, and for the non reader and writer this attitude provides a comfortable port.

The supportiveness of the small rural Riverina community with its patterns of close social and familial contact allows the person who cannot read and write to survive quite comfortably. Carol, a tutor co-ordinator who travels the region extensively, maintains that -

"..especially in the smaller communities, there is sometimes no need to learn to read and write, other people take care of these things."

Robert echos her sentiments and explains that in the workplace because of the close contacts that are established socially as well as professionally, everyone will make allowances. The need for literacy tuition is a non issue and the opinion that "Book Learnin' is for the birds" is endorsed -

"At different times when I have blokes with me and I have to take them out on a job with me, they might just drop a note saying that I have to take pipes to such and such a place. They understand at work so they just have a yarn to you and they say what's got to be done and away you go."

Robert knows half a dozen workmates who are in the same situation and who cope in the same way.

Maree, who has grown up in a small rural community near Albury and who is also an adult literacy tutor, recognises that the small country towns in the Riverina with their inbred sense of economic interdependence provide work opportunities for a wide variety of unskilled or semi skilled people. Their is a high degree of security in knowing that you can take your mower into town, and that it will be fixed by someone who is not qualified but who is good with his hands, and that it will not cost very much. Such a sense of security and entitlement mitigates against changing anyone's educational status. The arrangement fosters marginal employment and has a vested interest in keeping the social relationships stable. Reading and writing have little perceived value, they would only serve to upset the dependency relationships which have worked very well up until now.

"There are a number of jobs people can get who can't read and write. In a small community people have standing because they have been there a long time - farmhands,

farmworkers, shearers, roustabouts, the ones who work for the Water Commission, the ones who do their backyard mechanics. They can bring in a reasonable income. They are informal sorts of jobs. They accept that the need for reading and writing isn't quite as much as in the city, but there are no options for going ahead."

This scenario, however comfortable is not likely to continue in the future given the population trends and the increasingly urban personality of the region. Higher literacy standards are now demanded by nearly all occupations. The democratisation of the workplace in the larger urban centres will also mean that for individuals to take advantage of the rights which they have been accorded, they will need to be readers and writers.

"Workplaces are changing and there are much more democratic processes involved. For all people to participate in these requires a confidence to speak up in a group, and present an idea."

CHAPTER 8

A SANDWICH SHORT OF A PICNIC

This chapter captures the images and impressions which society has of the non literate person, and how this affects people's attitudes towards literacy tuition in the Riverina. It deals with the discrepancy between the image of the non literate person and the reality of how people survive in different ways, the rigours of the literate environment. It also explores the idea that the perpetuation of the dependent and helpless stereotype only serves to maintain the relationships between the non reader and writer, and the society.

Amongst the community there are attitudes and opinions about what sort of people can't read and write, and why. Frequently these images and impressions are negative, portraying a helpless individual, surviving on social welfare payments, unable to function in the wider society and condemned to a life of marginality. This type of paternalism does nothing for people for whom this is an accurate description, and it does even less for those individuals who are low literate but who survive well in their community.

SOME PREVAILING ATTITUDES

"I thought that everyone could read and write"

Reading and writing for many of us are activities as automatic and unconscious as breathing. A glance at the newspaper headlines on our way past the newsagent, a quick glimpse at the school newsletter to confirm the date of the sports carnival, changed traffic conditions on the way to work, and the day's work schedule displayed on the staff room notice board, are a tiny percentage of the literate tasks we complete in one day.

Leila who lives in a small country town in the west of the region believes that the predominant attitude in the community is that, *"We just take it as natural that we can read and write."* She attended a meeting last year to discuss the level of literacy in the town and she was surprised to find that literacy was a problem for a number of people. Although she had lived in this one place all her life and had lived through the heartbreaks of her own daughter's difficulties at school, she did not recognise until recently that other people had similar problems with reading and writing -

"At that meeting one of the shire blokes got up and said that he never knew that one of his labourers couldn't read and write until he (the labourer) mixed up the wrong drums of chemicals. That was a real eye opener for me. That was a real problem for the shire bloke and he had to sack him."

"Good morning. Disabilities"

(Response from the end of a telephone)

> Linked to the idea that everyone **can** read and write is the idea that if you can't, then there is something wrong with **you**.

This attitude begins in the culture of the classroom where the personality and background of the child are considered to be responsible for that child's inability to read and write at the same level as their peers. Sandra, the principal of a primary school, expresses her concern about those children who fail to learn to read and write at school. Some children bring to school a social background and intellectual heritage which is out of step with the predominant values and ways of working which characterise the school context. The school then categorises and files this mismatch using a variety of labels, none of which accurately reflect the developing personality of that child. They do serve to pigeon hole the child conveniently - first for 'treatment' and then for 'failure'.

"She was just a slow learning child, and when she left here she just didn't have a reading age at all. Some children are just not going to have the wherewithal to learn reading."

Sandra describes how she taught one child who left the school with no observed *"literacy skills"*.

"I honestly tried and tried with this child. I did everything I could possibly think of to do. We even had single sounds put on tape for him trying to get him to do the sounds, to try and remember the sounds. He couldn't do it. We tried it that way because he was a whizz at video games - anything mechanical he was great at. But he had this complete block about reading and he could just not cope. We've tried to follow the Brian Cambourne methods as well, write their own stories and learn their own stories. We've been doing all that sort of thing. But there is still that odd child that gets through."

The idea of the child being deficient in the educational vitamin which allows teacher to impart the skills of literacy, implies that the responsibility for failure is with the student. Joanne, a teacher with TAFE, picks up the pieces of educational wreckage. Her literacy students have to contend with the legacy of these attitudes before they can begin to learn.

"They have had a lifetime of socialisation within the school system that tells them that it matters very much that they can't read and write."

In keeping with this view of the non reader and non writer as a 'disabled' person, society tends to blame the 'victim', rather than the context or the conditions which surround the individual. Megan, who has the regional responsibility for the design and implementation of regional health programs, discusses the myth of egalitarianism in Australia. She thinks that the population is dominated by an ethic of 'victim blaming' - if you can't do it then there is something wrong with you.

"The stigma is felt by single parents, people from non English speaking backgrounds, the developmentally delayed, the aged and the illiterate. We have a very downgraded view of certain people."

The stigma makes it even more difficult for people who are not proficient readers and writers to seek help.

"They'll never amount to anything"

Another common community attitude expressed by a number of people, which is less vicious than 'victim blaming' but which nevertheless endorses the status quo, is the idea that the 'lower classes' are overflowing with low literate individuals who are content to be where they are. Kristy, a doctor's receptionist, discusses her encounters with poor readers and writers in these terms -

"Most people tend to accept who they are and what they are. You have got your illiterate people and they just plod along through life. Obviously they just accept what they are, and that's that. Illiterate people can't achieve too much because they don't know how to. The people who I have contact with who are illiterate are really the scums of society, as the society goes. No one gives them a second glance. They're at the bottom of the community."

Robert, who has attended literacy classes at TAFE, and who has been on that end of this social equation knows that -

"A lot of people class other people who can't read as living in the slums, kind of thing. A lot of people do, you know."

HOW DO THESE ATTITUDES AFFECT PEOPLE WHO ARE NOT PROFICIENT READERS AND WRITERS?

Directly reduce their inclination to seek help

In different parts of the Riverina these attitudes will be modified and mixed in different ways, but whatever the recipe the end result will be an environment which does not easily accept the status of the non reader and writer. Poor readers and writers have to be explained away in terms of low intelligence quotients, or in terms of disabilities, or in terms of the person's low social status in the community and the consequent deprived social conditions in which they live. The community is uninformed about both the nature of literacy and the types of problems which confront the low literate person. The community does little to help anyone change their literate status.

Leila, the mother of a young adult who has always had reading problems talks about how social pressure and other people's attitudes about reading and writing stop others from seeking the help which they need.

"One young fella I knew, who was about 19, said that he was going to enrol in literacy classes at Finley TAFE but he said that it would be too embarrassing to disappear from his mates. See, they all meet at the Cafe and if he started disappearing and said, 'Well I'm going to Finley', they would start asking him why. The idea of the sheer pressure just turned him off."

In this case, the lack of anonymity, the distances involved, the close social network and the negative social pressure stopped this young man enrolling in classes.

The negative attitudes associated with low levels of reading and writing often mean that, in the small closely knot towns of the Riverina, people are very unwilling to admit to anyone that they can't read or write. The 'expert' from the outside world, hoping to set up a

literacy class firstly has to contend with the entrenched attitudes of the community and secondly improve the self esteem of the potential participants. Given these constraints Robert comments that -

"I don't know if I would have gone to a class here in town, if there'd been one. To tell you the truth it hits home a bit. A lot of people like me back off especially if you're strangers, you know. It's downgrading of you to say that you can't read."

"It's a lot of fear inside you"

(Joan - literacy student)

Robert, a past student at TAFE, describes the kinds of concerns and worries that he felt when he first travelled from his own small town to the larger regional centre for literacy classes. At the basis of his anxiety is the notion that if you can't read and write you are a *"bit of a no hoper"*.

"I must admit that when I first went over to Wagga I did meet some other people from here, but they were doing other courses. I wasn't just too sure how I was going to go. I only met them in the Dining Area, but then I thought, 'What am I going to say if they say: 'What are you doing here?" But nobody sort of worried. That's just the sort of spur of the moment incidents that come up in everything. But it didn't happen so I just sort of let it roll along. But I tell you, I was worried."

Feeling ashamed

Some people who can't read and write are plagued by the idea that they failed to learn. They continue to compare their obviously inadequate school performance with that of their friends. They feel ashamed and incompetent, and this sense of failure is internalised. This effect of education has a universal ring. A student in a literacy class in New York expresses the futility of existence without self respect.

> **Dedication: To All Students and Tutors**
>
> **I am opening my heart again. The first time I came to Literacy Volunteers, I wrote a true story about the image of me. I wrote about how I felt in the world.**
>
> **The world to me was a little box and I was in the box. And in the four corners of the box, there was a world full of words. And nowhere to run.**
>
> **As the years went by, the box got tighter and I got older. There were more words to read, more words to write. I was so sad. I asked myself, 'Why am I the one who cannot read and write, and my friends can read and write?'**
>
> **I was so sad that I wanted to end it all, so I ran into a building to jump off the roof but I just could not do it.**
>
> **I am happy that I did not jump, for as you can see I can read and write and I am no longer in the box. So I say to you not to give up on anything in life.**
>
> **Love You always for what you are.**
>
> - Anonymous Student

> This dedication is taken from a set of publications produced by students in New York for adults who are learning to read and write. (Publisher's Weekly, Feb 18, 1988, p 18).

The fact that feeling ashamed often precludes people from enrolling in literacy classes is supported by Sue an adult student with TAFE.

"I felt ashamed. Some years ago I wanted to go out to the College Literacy classes, but I was too ashamed. I was ashamed when I first came here, but now I've joined, it's marvellous."

Feeling Inferior

Community ignorance can often produce a sense of inferiority which dominates the life of the poor reader and writer. Feelings of inferiority can often cause confusion, and immobilise the individual. They can explain apparent inactivity and the reluctance of people to take up the offers of literacy tuition. Tracey, a TAFE co-ordinator, talks about the first contact between the student and the teacher and how this is affected by the students' perceptions of their own inferiority.

"When people ring up about a class they want to know who else is in the class. They don't know anybody. Then they'll say, 'I don't know anybody in that class.' Or if they do know somebody they'll say, 'I know so and so - I'm not going.' So both things can be a problem. I think that they don't want to be associated with other people who are failures. Because they have a stereotype in their mind about what sort of person can't read and write. And that person is a failure with a capital 'F'."

Learning to deal with the world differently demands a certain amount of courage. People with a well settled sense of their own competence accept that failure can be part of the process of learning, and that it is something to be built on rather than avoided. For those people whose ideas about their competencies are already infected by feelings of failure and inferiority, the idea of taking on classes in the specific area of highest failure - literacy - is akin to submitting themselves to torture. Many people avoid confronting the problem and disguise its very existence. Linda, with her years of experience as an adult literacy tutor expresses her concern about the effects which community attitudes have on the inclination of people to look for help with literacy.

"There is a predominant feeling in the community that they're not as good as anybody else and they have certainly picked up this feeling. They are made to feel that there is something wrong with them. That they've got something missing because they can't read. Naturally they don't want to bring it out in the open. They would prefer to try and hide it."

The severity and extent of social pressure to keep the facts about personal literacy levels quiet demands creative acts of deception on the part of the individual. There is a high degree of strain and stress required to keep up the pretence. When the opportunity finally comes and individuals are convinced by people around them that they are not inferior or disabled, and that low levels of reading and writing do not correlate with estimates of personal worth or social value, then the release from these community imposed burdens can be quite spectacular.

Sarah, who offers literacy tuition in the workplace, comments that her initial contact with people in a confidential situation often leads to an emotionally charged and intimate set of disclosures.

"... people often become quite upset ... a lot of them do. Once chap in particular once said to me, 'I am really pleased that I have spoken to you. I just feel like I've been to confession.'"

Glenda extends the picture by explaining how working in a group context can help the individual to reset their lives on a positive track. Becoming literate is also a process of becoming a more confident human being.

"Once students come to a class they realise that they are not alone any more. They begin to admit that there are things that they cannot do, rather than denying it. But it doesn't matter, because in the future they say, 'I will be able to do it'. They can confess then ...."

"It's still a disability"

(Karen - adult literacy student)

The exclusivity of those who are literate, and the general inability of the community to understand the challenges which confront the individual who cannot read and write proficiently, encourage the disability mentality. It is a patronising set of attitudes which once again throws the responsibility for low levels of literacy back on a flaw or failing within the person. It is naive, simplistic and dangerous. It labels people and, having done so, offers no possibility for change.

"It's a disability if you can't read. You feel like you're out of place. You find that you get yourself that far down and you feel like you're left out in the community."

"I just went into my shell"

(Pat - adult literacy student)

One of the most socially debilitating effects of low levels of literacy are described by adults who have withdrawn from everyday life through fear of being 'found out'. Their perceptions of the community as an unsympathetic and critical group of people have led them to take no risks at all. They will not have their non literate status uncovered because they will have no contact with those people who could possibly recognise their problem.

Brian is an adult literacy student who, until recently, would not go out.

"I used to just stay home all the time .... I wouldn't go anywhere and I wouldn't see anyone. I was very shy. Now I feel more able to go out."

Sue felt the same way, and her confidence reached such an ebb that she had to seek psychiatric help.

"I lost all my confidence in people and I was finding it very difficult to come outside my room. I wanted to stay in all the time and I was very frightened and very nervy when I had to make a decision to go out. Learning to read has settled me down a lot."

In the Riverina there are a small number of adult literacy students who come from non English speaking backgrounds. Some of these students have no English at all; others can speak, but not read or write the language. There are often women whose husbands have taken care of all the literacy tasks in the household. They have each other for support but they are socially isolated from the rest of the community. Christine teaches three English Literacy classes in a river town in the region and she maintains that her job is much more than teaching language to her students. Her job is to provide community support to people, who are unsure of their cultural roles in a new society, while providing them with some basic literacy skills. She recognises clearly that language encapsulates a set of beliefs and perceptions.

"I see it as going further than just Evening classes. I visit my people. One of the Arab women is learning to drive and they are going to get an interpreter in so she can do the exam. They all need some community support. Say that these women want to buy a new bra. They don't understand what size. They need someone to go with them to explain. Their husbands won't go with them. No. I asked one of the husbands of the Arab women, 'How does she buy things?' He said that she has to look and find them. And if she doesn't find them, she doesn't get them."

"I'll manage, I'll manage"

(55 year old man who cannot read and write)

Community attitudes relating to literacy influence different individuals in different ways. They may dominate a person's perception of themselves or they may be peripheral to other more powerful social determinants. The strength and extent of relationships in a community may mean that literacy tasks are completed by one group of people on behalf of another group, or by one of the family members. Greg, a solicitor in a small country town in the centre of the region regularly fills out forms for a wide variety of people in the community. He thinks that a lack of literacy skills does not necessarily prejudice an individual's life chances if there is -

"... a back up system and networking. Their family is there and professional help is available."

He tells the story of some Portuguese friends who adapted quickly and successfully to the literate demands of Australian society. The family members supported each other so strongly that the issue of literacy was resolved on the grounds of competence alone.

"He was a very talented builder and he is fantastically successful now, but he virtually couldn't read or write any English. And I remember his daughter at the age of seven being given a typewriter and she had to do all the letters and the accounts and whatever. She was the mouthpiece."

Kathy, an experienced teacher and counsellor in one of the most isolated towns in the region, also expresses her confidence in the ability of the individual to survive without highly developed literacy skills.

"Maybe if a person has lived a fair number of years and are getting by just reading the major headlines and maybe forgetting their glasses when they have a form to fill in - dodging things in different ways. They have got by and they don't feel that they have the need for anything more."

People in the Riverina can survive well without being literate and without feeling the need to change their status. The scope of the personal social network that supports the poor reader and writer, determines what the quality of that survival will be. In the small towns of the Riverina where the population is relatively stable, there are sets of well developed relationships between people who have literacy skills and those who don't. These arrangements are generally personal and private and obligatory. Greg thinks that part of his role is as a -

"... literacy translator. They bring in letters to me and forms, and generally they get me to fill them out for them. They have given up on learning to read and write and they have developed some very good techniques for getting round it. Someone will help them out."

The Country Can Look After Its Own

However in the Riverina the comfortable picture of the family and the community 'looking after their own' is changing. Employment prospects and urban drift mean that the future for the small rural town is not necessarily tied to growth and progress. With the pressure on the farming community already at exasperation point the capacity of the rural sector to employ yet more people is not economically feasible. The rural sector is already saturated with employees, and the level of under employment in small country towns is often quite visible. People work at harvest; on the hay; do a bit of fencing or droving; but the rest of the time, or concurrently, they are sustained by unemployment benefits. The trend is a more noticeable drift to the urban centres of the Riverina. People are being forced to leave the small town, to leave the community support patterns, to leave the security of extended networks of friends and relations. Judy, a literacy student, describes how she feels as a poor reader and writer in an urban setting where she has little or no personal support.

"I don't think that many people who are going through it would believe that it's OK. Everybody wants to get ahead in themselves. They might not come out and say it. They might hide the fact. But underneath they've all got the fear of not knowing enough. It's like a disability. You feel like you're crippled."

Independence in a larger centre is a prerequisite for employment. This independence entails a competency in literacy that allows the individual to cope with living in an urban environment. Employment means moving, and moving implies a level of individual confidence which includes the ability to make informed decisions on everything from bus timetables to rental agreements. A large part of this confidence is contingent upon the ability to read and write at a level that is not only functional, but recreational and informative.

The extent to which people perceive the negative influences of community attitudes therefore depends on how cosmopolitan they want to be. Paul, a young man who desperately wanted to become a jockey had to balance his ambition against the potential embarrassment caused by attending literacy classes. People like Paul decide to step over the barriers of embarrassment and fear for different and highly personal reasons.

John wanted to coach the junior football team -

"He had been very happy in his circumstances, especially in this smaller community because people often did things for him, so he saw no need to go and improve his skills. But he wanted to help his son with soccer and so he had to learn the rules and pass an umpire's exam. When he went to do it he couldn't. In the same week he heard the ad on the radio for literacy classes. So he sent his wife off to find out about it. They lived on a

property, so he felt that he really couldn't go to town for classes, so his wife went and did the tutoring course. He actually drove her over fifty miles once a week, and he stayed with her while she attended the class."

The tenacity of all these attitudes in the Riverina are strengthened by a number of regional characteristics. Firstly the relative isolation of the smaller country town means that the opportunities for extended social contact beyond the fringes of your own town are restricted. The individual has to make their life in their town, and if that town is not sympathetic or well informed about the problems which confront the poor reader and writer, then a great deal of time and effort can be spent in covering up the existence of the problem.

The tightly strung social web which encloses many Riverina towns, monitors, supports or constrains the activities of its residents.

CHAPTER 9

GLASSES NOT CLASSES

This perspective deals with the misconceptions that poor readers and writers have about being a literate person and how this affects their incentive to change their literate status. Mechanical and medical diagnoses, and thus solutions, are often more comfortable to adopt than structural or personal ones.

Despite the fact that most people are literate, many are ill informed about the process of becoming so. Poor readers and writers often carry with them views about literacy which are prejudicial. They are sometimes influenced by impressions of the apparent complexity of literacy which puts this activity out of their intellectual grasp. Others regard reading and writing with a type of mystical reverence. It is a higher order skill which they will never understand. Literacy is sometimes thought of as a set of codes which could be cracked if they were just given the right pieces of information. It would be easy if they *"just knew how"*. The result is the same whatever set of attitudes apply. Poor readers and writers have misconceptions about literacy which often stop them from seeking help.

Reading and Writing are Really Simple

The myth that reading and writing are simple processes, encourages the public idea that if you can't read there must be something wrong with you. It entrenches and supports the community attitude that poor readers and writers are disabled, inferior victims who could help themselves if they just put in the effort. The diagnosis of "dyslexia" is an obvious response to such a set of unattractive community attitudes.

Dyslexia, or word blindness, is basically medical. It is seen as a brain function disorder which has observable symptoms. Its incidence has been well documented in medical literature. It does exist but not on the scale that the popular press would like the public to believe. It is a term which has been borrowed and inflated by the media. It is generally misunderstood. Its incidence is misquoted and its possible 'cures' are expensive and concentrate on providing mechanical solutions. The enthusiasm with which dyslexia is accepted as a legitimate explanation for reading and writing problems is a measure of the social pressure which operates to penalise and blame the "illiterate". Having a congenital or hereditary condition is preferable to being labelled as inferior. It means that the responsibility for the condition of being a poor reader or writer no longer rests with the individual. It is outside their control. The worth of the person is left intact. An external explanation of the problem of reading and writing has been found.

"Dyslexia" deserves sympathy. "Illiteracy" invokes criticism. The society is much more willing to accept a person with dyslexia than a person with poor reading and writing skills which carry no legitimising medical title. The enthusiasm with which the condition has been recognised, diagnosed and supported by the community is reflected in Kristy's descriptions of one her doctor's patients. She thinks, as many people do, that "dyslexia" is a condition outside the control of the individual, whilst "illiteracy" is the result of a flaw in the worth of the individual.

"You have got your illiterate people and your dyslexic. So you've got your two. The dyslexic tries and we have one lady who is dyslexic, who is a patient and she had surpassed all her goals and she really does well. We have others that just accept their illiteracy and plod along through life."

It is a condition which solves uncomfortable problems for everyone. No one is responsible for the status of the poor reader and writer - the individual, the school, the society have all be absolved by the discovery of the existence and the effects of this disorder.

People who are poor readers and writers are often comfortable with their classification as dyslexic. They find it easier to discuss their literacy problems, using the condition to account for the described problems which they have. However dyslexia, as a concept reflects the misconception that reading and writing are only about decoding the physical symbols on the page. This notion can stand in the way of developing literacy.

The poor reader and writer who has taken on their classification as dyslexic may preserve their self worth but they may simultaneously sacrifice their involvement in their own learning, by putting the problem too far outside their individual responsibility.

Heather, an adult literacy tutor comments that -

"People will ring and say, 'I have been diagnosed as dyslexic, I don't know whether you can help me?' We just tend to say, 'Come along and have a go.' If you said to them, 'Well that's a lot of rubbish' then you have lost them straight away. They just wouldn't bother coming. But then if they come along with too many labels then it can take them an awful long time to get rid of them."

The Indecipherable Code

Some poor readers and writers have the idea that literacy represents a code which they have not yet managed to crack. They have applied this philosophy to literate activities and managed to create an independent and symbolic coding system which they can 'read and write'. In the absence of literacy skills they have imposed their own relationships on the literate world.

Claire, a tutor with "SKILLSHARE", describes the innate capacity of one her students to deal with literate demands of his job without the traditional reading and writing skills -

"We had a guy who came back to do word processing and he couldn't read and write. What he did was to memorise the symbols and he operated completely on symbols and he admitted that he was illiterate and he could use the word processor and he could use the computer but what he was doing was memorising symbols, he couldn't read a thing."

Leila describes how a friend of hers is committed to cracking the reading code. He has attributed his inability to read and write to poor memory. He can't keep enough of the code in his mind at one time to allow him to make sense of what he sees. He is still committed to working on it.

"He's 54. He started by working out all the signs when they travel to Deniliquin. All the signs they see. He'll read out the sign now. And it's taken him all these years to work

this out. He reckons that he knows his problem. 'My Memory'. He reckons that if he could work his memory a bit better everything would be OK. But he gets very frustrated."

Memory

A lot of poor readers and writers blame their bad memories for their low levels of literacy. They are convinced that literacy tasks are memory based and consequently they are reluctant to take on tuition. They feel that there is little chance of their memories improving and so classes would just be another futile attempt.

Robert attended reading classes at the TAFE. He has a conception of his own learning style and capacity that gives an oblique picture of what he thinks literacy learning is all about. Memory skills and a mature mind are the prerequisites which Robert considers to be necessary before you can become a fluent and competent reader.

"I'm 40 now, but I reckon in my mind I'm probably to that standard of reading say 10. My mind has probably never matured in that field. I could never do anything with my hands, like the kids would build something with the Meccano sets and it just wouldn't come to me. The mind wasn't ready when I was ready. I can do something and I can get on with doing it and I'm fine, but as soon as we've finished it and start something else, that just leaves me, leaves my mind. Nothing stays there as far as I'm concerned."

100% Accurate all the Time

Some poor readers and writers think that literate activities demand total accuracy. Unlike other learning situations guesses, approximations and confirmations are not appropriate. The ways and means to pull down a motor and then put it back together again have no place in the literate world. They are unable to transfer the confidence in their abilities from one context to another. The idea of perfection the first time through, means that some people never begin. Heather maintains that this unrealistic attitude does not dominate in other situations but when it comes to reading and writing some of her students are not convinced by the argument.

"Because with everything we do, if we think that we have to be perfect as soon as we start, then it would take an awful long time to get started, wouldn't it?"

Robin, who is responsible for a number of workplace literacy programs and who has had contact with a large number of poor readers and writers, thinks that -

"There are a huge number of misconceptions that people have about being a good reader and writer. They are one of the first barriers that we break down. There is the feeling on the part of these people who have only had limited access to school that people who have been there can do everything perfectly. And this BE PERFECT attitude often prevents people from having a go ...."

You Start to Go Backwards

The culmination of all these misconceptions creates a separation of literacy from the literate environment. Many people see literacy as a set of skills which are practiced and learnt but which have little relationship to the world around them.

"Reading - I'm pretty steady at it. It's like anything. If you keep doing something enough times you must pick up a few extra words here and there. I find it hard now to sit at home. I know I should read but I can't ever find the urgency to read. I'm one of those persons who's either full steam ahead or I might as well turn it in and go to sleep. I get things I want to read, but I find it hard. I haven't really got many interests but I always buy the "Land". I buy "Deals on Wheels" and farm magazines, more or less on pricing and machinery and things like that. I don't mind that, but I found now that I don't read what it says at the bottom of it. That's sort of slipped by me. Once you get going for a while - like if you do it for a few weeks, you get a little better and then for some unknown reason you don't do it. Then you start to go backwards."

Robert signals the idea that for him, literacy is set of skills that exist in a vacuum. There is no acknowledgement of literate environment and its effects on the developing proficiency of the reader and write. It is clear that the adult educator must provide reasons and necessity and interest and support if literacy as an activity is to have meaning and relevance.

"Two environmental features surrounded the new literates who retained their literacy once the program and its teachers left the area. One was the provision of opportunities for those who could read and write to talk about what they had read or wanted to write. A second was the establishment and maintenance of institutions outside the home which promoted talk about written materials. Without both of these, new literates did not retain their skills in reading and writing." (Brice Heath, 1985, p 12)

"What is the context for learning behaviour, as distinct from learning literacy skills? All of this flutter is a deterrent to attending to the meaning of being literate. It is literate behaviour which is therefore left unattended by researchers and schools, while public attention is diverted to literacy skills. Hence, what we ignore is the denial of the life chances and choices for a major proportion of the population. Access to all but the most menial jobs ... now demands far more than literacy skills; upward socio economic movement depends on being literate and being a citizen who behaves and thinks like 'literates' should." (Brice Heath, 1985, p 2)

This study is concerned primarily with people who live outside the main urban areas in the Riverina. Small country towns, farm living, and itinerant labour are not the indicators of a social environment which has literate activity at its core. To this we add the widespread misconceptions about the process of becoming a reader and writer and we have a new perspective on adult literacy in the Riverina. Establishing environments for learning beyond what exists, is the challenge for educators, employers and prospective students.

CHAPTER 10

'ROOS ON THE ROAD

This perspective deals with some facts of life which prevent people from taking up the option of literacy classes.

Often when we are searching for the parameters of a problem we become enmeshed in the details of the big picture. In our enthusiastic pursuit of the unilateral solution we sometimes tend to devalue those mechanical aspects of everyday life which influence our existences. This perspective explores some of the personal details and realities of life in the Riverina and examines their impact on the aspirations of the poor reader and writer.

People are Surviving

"They just think, 'Oh well I can survive without it. Why worry.'"

The comfort of a predictable existence, the support of family, friends and the community and the desire to preserve the satisfactions of a lifestyle all mitigate against change. If an individual's low literacy levels have been accommodated by the wider community or by the person's immediate family there is no compulsion to change. Becoming a literate individual would only upset the social patterns that have become a way of life.

Paul, a solicitor in a small country town is the literate voice for a number of residents. He maintains that whilst a low level of literacy may prejudice people's overall life chances there are groups within his rural community whose level of survival is pleasant, satisfying and settled. There is no reason to change anything. The fact that they depend on someone else to act as translator for their literacy tasks is more than compensated for by their independence in the other dimensions of their lives.

"They pick up a lot of wood and cut firewood. They also do a fair bit of shooting, fox skins and so on. They're lucky now that they've got their licenses, their firearm licenses, because if they had to go now so much of the emphasis is on written tests these days that I'd reckon they would be stranded. They're quite good with mechanical things and I think it was the third baby of Pete and Joanna's, Pete delivered it at home. I said to him, 'How did you go?' And he said, 'Oh, Alright, but I didn't know what to do when the cord came. But I went and got the big fat piece, the sister from the hospital, and she fixed that up for me.'"

Craig, an adult literacy tutor echoes these ideas and extends them. Poor readers and writers have often developed a sophisticated set of strategies for dealing with the literate world. The status quo, however apparently limiting to the outsider's perceptions, is satisfactory. Not everyone is convinced by the ethics of material and social progress.

"Another reason why people don't take advantage of literacy classes is that many of them have learnt survival skills and because they are surviving they don't need anything else. That's their base level need and that's being met. They might not be surviving to a level that other people would be satisfied with but they have managed to get by and they just

keep on functioning at that level. If they weren't surviving they would have to do something about it."

It often takes a crisis at work or with children and family to prompt the individual to look for literacy tuition. The concept that there has to be a clearly established 'need' before help can be offered is a strong ethic amongst some adult educators. Marilyn articulates this philosophy when she says that -

"People may come without feeling that need, but they usually leave after a while. So unless we have a need to fulfill whether it's a social need or a work oriented need in any walk of life, we usually don't persevere."

Changing employment conditions, children growing up and wanting help with homework, and the reading and writing tasks involved in coaching the basketball team are just a taste of the multitude of highly compelling and personal reasons which constitute individual need.

Robin recounts her experience with a man who had been comfortable with his status as a non reader and writer until the nature of his job changed and his abilities were stretched to breaking point. The drama of discovering that he could lose his job if he didn't raise his literacy level is a clear and strong incentive which overcame some of the barriers to learning.

"We had a man come one night and he pulled a crumpled bit of paper out of his pocket and he said, 'For God's sake you've got to help me learn to read this.' And he had keyboards of computers and the words that go with it, with the knobs. STOP, START - some of them were quite big words. He said, 'Our section's going to be computerised. I don't know what I am going to do.' He was in charge of keeping all the machines in one section going."

In the rural areas of the Riverina, the community insulates its less literate members more than the urban environment has the social capacity to do. The community structure diminishes the profile of literacy and reduces the immediate need to become literate.

Tracey, a tutor co-ordinator summarises this tendency when she says -

"A generally stable population makes the support structure much stronger than it would be in other areas."

Marginal employment, supportive networks of friends and relations, and low levels of community information about literacy all help to put literacy well down the priority list.

Kathleen, a teacher in a small and isolated town discusses some of the personal factors which mitigate against recognising, expressing and doing something about becoming a literate person.

"In the country rather than the city with unskilled work, just ordinary labouring where it's simply a matter of taking a spade and digging a hole or whatever the physical activity is, there is no need to read to find out how to do it or follow instructions. But jobs that require filling in forms, or writing resumes or any sorts of things like that, then they're in trouble. Literacy problems are more obvious in the city because the jobs that are available are more likely to be those that require some kind of ability. Unless you are literate to the standard we want in industry or whatever, there is no place for you friend."

Not everyone involved in offering adult literacy tuition accepts this situation with such equanimity. Margaret, who is responsible for running an extensive set of literacy courses in the region, feels that the literate person must sensitively consider the situation of the non literate person whilst constantly encouraging them to be otherwise.

"You can say that you shouldn't talk people into classes, but if they make the initial contact, then they are waiting to be talked into it. They want a bit of follow up help to get them there. I don't mind talking to someone for an hour if it gets them there. I also think that 'not being totally convinced about the class' is a bit of a prop or a crutch that you carry along just in case, because people feel that they are the only one with problem. I think that it's an excuse just in case it doesn't work. An exit point for the student if they feel they are failing."

Information

"As far as not taking advantage of the services is concerned, it either is that they don't know that the services are available, or the service isn't convenient for them to approach."

It is clear that in the Riverina there is a terrific amount of misinformation or no information about what it means to be literate. Because literacy is a part of life many people take it for granted without ever consciously appreciating or articulating the value of being a literate person. Community perceptions of poor readers and writers are at best patronising and at worst punitive. Information about where literacy help is available is not public knowledge yet. People may not know that courses are available. If they do they may be put off by the fact that they would have to pay fees. Financially this is not a choice for a growing number of people.

Greta, a teacher with students aged between 17 and 25 in a large urban centre talks about her perceptions of the amount of misinformation that exists.

"I think that a lot of people unless they are very much in touch with the system of TAFE don't realise that they may be able to do certain courses and that these courses are exempt from fees. Everyone here heard the publicity about fees and courses for TAFE, but a lot of those people who are eligible for free training are not aware of it. A lot of people who come here I've been telling that to have no idea."

The limited budgets available for advertising, travel and general public relations go against the notions that adults who are poor readers and writers need a lot of time and public encouragement before they are prepared to enrol in literacy classes. Time, information and encouragement are not easily funded. They do not lend themselves to quantification and their results are not likely to be immediately visible.

It is paradoxical that people in some of the smaller and more isolated towns in the region may in fact be better informed about the types of services and facilities which are available to them than people who live in the major urban centres. Programs such as OUTREACH which is run by TAFE is specifically designed to contact groups of people who are geographically isolated. Within rural culture the people who are most likely to be isolated by geography are women, the disabled and the Koories.

"I see a role with Outreach in teaching people who they can go to for what service - disseminating information about where you can go and what you can get. You take a little

town like Carthaday, and they are very well organised in terms of knowing what services are available for particular groups."

There is always a time lag between publicity and enrolment. This fact is well documented, and is supported by both teachers and adult students. The inertia, the fact that people do not immediately respond to the publicity, can be explained by the pressure which a lot people feel to keep their poor reading and writing levels a total secret. The level of motivation and the assurances of confidentiality must both be high before unsure individuals can feel capable of admitting their need for help. A lot of positive public information is needed to combat the generally negative images that surround the less literate members of the community.

The job of informing the region about the adult education services which are available is also the responsibility of the Regional Adult Education Officer with the Regional Council of Adult Education. This person has a daunting task given the size of the region and the very different needs which exist in the Riverina.

Rural Timetable

"You have quite a lot of farmer types here, so obviously at certain times of the year you lose your class."

Tracey, who runs literacy classes in a town which is supported by the farming activities around it, has literacy classes at a set time on a set day. The class works well as a unit but its routine is disturbed by the rhythm of the farming calendar.

A time commitment is often difficult to give because events such as sowing, or harvest or shearing demand that everything else assume temporal subservience.

"Farmers just go in spasms. Six weeks when they are not doing anything and then six weeks when they are working twenty hours a day."

Fear of Change

"They feel that you're better than what they are, and they don't like it."

Learning anything changes the status of an individual in a relationship. If the relationship is a comfortable one then it may have the capacity to absorb the change. Otherwise it may cause severe dislocation.

Becoming literate changes the system of dependency which has pertained up until now. The person who has been relied on to do the banking and write the lists and provide guidance to the family based on their appreciation of the mass of domestic literature which confronts any family, will have to re-negotiate their relationships with their partner or friend.

People in this situation have a number of personal choices. Sometimes the poor reader and writer decides that the dislocation being caused by their newly emerging abilities is so great that they will discontinue classes. Sometimes they go on and learn to cope with the changes in their lives. Sometimes their teaching has been sufficiently sensitive and well developed that they can cope with different social contexts and genre.

Jenny, a TAFE teacher with a lot of experience in Koori education asserts that any learning must come from, and return to, a social context. Otherwise learning has the potential of fracturing a person's life.

"In the aboriginal community there is that extra difficulty in that you could be the only one in your household who is actually going somewhere on a regular basis. There is a pressure and a lack of confidence. Also they are taking on a white education, and there is always the fear of being a coconut, and therefore not able to fit back into the community. So being able to take from the white education system what they want and being able to change registers in their speech and written work is very important. We make an effort to point out the differences between registers. But they make an effort too. Once they have gained confidence they make sure that you are aware of it too. Especially the older ones who have jobs and who may be here learning skills like report writing or literacy to help them with their work based activities. They are very aware of changing registers, and they will say to you, 'That's not how we would say it.'"

The problem of family dislocation and the fear of potential change is felt particularly by rural women whose status and time are often subservient to the demands of the farm routine. While this problem is not confined only to women in the country, the constraints of rural life throw the conflicts of women acquiring literacy into high relief. The landscape is not a pleasant one. Barbara comments that, *"Self education always comes at the bottom of the list for country women. They have all these other commitments that they have and they are not allowed to do anything unless they do everything else properly first. I'm not sure whether that is imposed from outside or whether it has just built up inside themselves. They feel they are being selfish by wanting to go to class."*

Terry who has had a lot of experience in adult literacy education in the country discusses the extent to which feelings of dependency must be maintained by one person in a relationship -

"I've had women students come into the course and it's caused all sorts of problems and dislocations of the family. Husbands start to feel threatened. We had a student who was removed from a class by her father because he didn't want here there. He came and got her and said, 'She's not coming to this. I'm taking her home.'"

Leaving people without literacy maintains the power that another individual has over them.

"I had another student who would regularly bring her brother to class. Then one day I asked her to fill in something for her brother and I realised that she had exactly the same problem as her brother but she said to me, 'I'd like to come to class but I'm not allowed to.' I would never have believed that before I started this job, I would have thought that was feminists exaggerating again. But it's true and it happens regularly in this town."

Child Care

"In Narrandera they found that one of the main reasons why women did not come to class was because of the lack of child care. That is true for so many courses not just adult literacy. If there are no child care facilities it makes a mockery of offering courses to women."

Parents of young children often find it difficult to attend formal classes outside the home because of the difficulty of finding and paying for adequate child care. This applies to people who live in small country towns or larger urban centres. For the person in the smaller more isolated township in the Riverina the distances, and therefore the time, involved in getting to and from classes held mainly in the larger centres represents a large child care bill. This constraint applies particularly where the parent who is responsible for the young child is female. Feelings of guilt and anxiety are common expressions from women who have returned to attend literacy classes.

Questions about who will look after the child and how much it will cost are sometimes sufficient to tip the scales against literacy tuition particularly if the decision to enrol is marginal in the first place. Joan, an adult literacy student, describes the special mixture of anxiety and misinformation which prevents young females from coming to literacy classes.

"In a lot of cases the women with children are not game to try it because when it comes to the point they're worried about their children - they don't know there's any care or anything like that ...."

Geographic Isolation

"Hillston is very isolated. People don't want to go there even though it has a good road. People don't want to drive at night. TAFE has tried running courses at night there but they couldn't get teachers to go from here to there because the kangaroo problem is so horrific. Even the locals won't drive at night."

The geographic isolation of parts of the Riverina helps to explain why some people did not learn to read and write in the first place and how distance and settlement patterns can conspire to discourage potential students.

The distances between some of the smaller towns and the larger regional centres in the Riverina create a sense of resistance. If adults feel that they must preserve the anonymity of their literate status, then it is mandatory that they travel. This brings with it a clutch of attendant problems ranging from road conditions and the weather, to questions of who will pay the petrol bill. A narrow road, full of pot holes and banked with soft edges will be avoided by local motorists as much as possible. Karen, an adult literacy tutor comments that -

"A lot of people can't just up and travel 130km. Particularly if you're working. TAFE is open at night time, but it's a hell of a long way to go and come back at night time."

In the Riverina the population density of the farming areas implies that someone in the educational partnership will have to travel long distances. It may be the volunteer tutor, it may be the adult or it may be the trained teacher offering group classes. The further west, the greater are the distances between towns and farms. Thoughts of fatigue, road accidents and petrol costs become more important as the distances grow. For the person who has been working all day the prospect of a long drive to attend a literacy class can be daunting. The motivation to learn to read and write is not always strong enough to sustain the individual over these long, lonely country roads. Leila talks about a family she knows who were isolated as children by distance and family ethics.

"Years ago this one family never went to school and they never had as much correspondence as they do now. Their father was a great one for work. Education is no

good. There was no traffic. No nothing. They never came to town. And it wasn't until the parents died that they started venturing into town and they found a whole new world. But they couldn't read or write."

Distance between towns is not the only form of geographic isolation. People living in the larger urban centres can also be isolated by inadequate public transport facilities. In a city where mobility is predicated on access to a motor vehicle there are going to be people who are geographically imprisoned. A low income and the consequent necessity to find low cost housing usually out and away from the urban centre where the facilities are concentrated, means that people can find services just as inaccessible in the city as anyone who lives 150km from the nearest town. Mobility is a pre-requisite to literacy classes. Pat, who comes to a city based literacy class maintains that -

"A lot of the younger ones gave up because it's just too hard getting transport."

Lyn, a tutor co-ordinator with TAFE explains that -

"A lot of the students in the volunteer program don't have transport but where the tutor has transport then it's alright."

Work Schedules

"There are Chinese people who are cooks in restaurants who I know should be at my classes, but because my classes are at night they are busy preparing and selling food."

Work timetables and schedules can occupy a large role in determining whether people are able to participate in literacy classes. The times at which classes are offered may clash badly with the demands of changing shifts or permanent night shifts. People may be so exhausted by the nature of their work that they feel that any further demands on their time or energy are beyond their capacity to respond.

It could be argued that perhaps all classes should be run with flexibility and that attempts to accommodate different time frames should be more concerted. However in the smaller towns of the Riverina region it is also a problem to find trained teachers to staff literacy classes. Frequently the teachers themselves have full time day jobs and the only choice is a night class or no class.

Some parts of the Riverina region rely heavily on a supply of itinerant labour to support agricultural enterprise. Fruit picking, the rice harvest, shearing and droving provide employment for families who are always on the move. It is usual that this work is a family tradition handed down from one generation to the next. Within this tightly woven social web, the importance of becoming literate, and the opportunities to do so, are restricted. The literate and bureaucratic demands on people who are employed on an itinerant basis can be avoided most successfully.

Sandra, the principal of a primary school in an area with a high itinerant population, comments on her observations of the relationship between work commitments and literacy levels -

"There are quite a few children who don't go to school. We find a few of them who are enrolled in correspondence. When they come to school they bring their correspondence work, but they have no idea how to do it. And quite often they have an illiterate mother who doesn't know how to read it anyway. It becomes a Catch 22 situation."

The work routine and the lifestyle are self sustaining.

Lyn is a literacy co-ordinator with TAFE in a Riverina town which is renowned for its floating and ever changing population. The itinerant employment patterns are accommodated by using volunteer literacy tutors and it is a system which works well up to a point.

"Initially most students go to the home of the tutor, because of confidentiality and getting them to start. 75% start off on a one to one basis. And then they branch into the class. They are on the whole a mobile population. We have a high population of itinerant workers here. We have one at the moment who can't make up his mind whether to go back to Queensland or Melbourne."

In the more urban contexts workplace literacy programs are an attempt to blend the need for upgraded literacy skills to cope with technological change, and the realisation that this must be provided within the working context. Sarah works on a regional project for the Victorian Department of Labour which recognises that -

" .... basic education should be provided to workers whose jobs are at risk because they just don't have the skills to take up further training."

This initiative is a potentially refreshing approach to the issue of poor reading and writing levels amongst the working population. However on an organisational level it is beset with problems. Large workplaces often operate twenty four hours a day and shifts rotate at an alarming rate. Bodies and minds find it difficult to adjust to such unpredictable work patterns. Fitting literacy classes into patterns of work which change from week to week is a difficult task and demands a large and flexible staff.

Margaret, a workplace literacy tutor comments on this unpredictability -

"Like at McCarthy's, one week you're on day shift, and the next week you're on afternoon shift and the next week night shift. But it's not sort of one month on one shift, and one month on another shift. You change from week to week."

Workplace literacy programs must also take account of the length of the shifts which people work and when the classes occur in these shifts. At a hospital, a literacy course for domestic staff has proved to be very successful because the medical administration and the course co-ordinator have recognised and provided for the difficulties which could confront staff who -

" .... work a ten hour shift - two days on and two days off. Three of the people in the class are single mums, and the possibilities of them doing any other classes at other times is just about zilch. People on the supervisory staff just said that there's no point in having a class in the afternoon because the people have been working since seven o'clock in the morning and they're going to be tired - so it's a quarter past nine until a quarter past twelve in the morning. Whereas in other places it's later in the afternoon.

The facts of life which influence people's decisions to take up the offer of literacy tuition are complex. They are not separate from one another. They occur in a mixture of ways in different people in different contexts.

Some of the factors which determine an individual's inclination to become literate are outside the person, and some are to be negotiated within the persons' own mind. If the motivation is strong enough of course people will move mountains to achieve their goals.

However it is clear that there is a real educational tension between servicing the needs of the clients (those that express them) and actively re-educating the community. Clients, opinion leaders and referers, all need clear, usable information about ways to overcome inertia, embarrassment and barriers to access. Given all the factors which mitigate against becoming literate in this region there is immense scope for action to balance the forces which maintain the literate status quo.

CHAPTER 11

A TALE OF TWO TOWNS

This chapter presents two Riverina towns, fictionally named Cheldon and Sandock, and examines the importance which their populations attach to being or becoming literate. It also explores the regional features which influence the status of literacy and access to literacy tuition.

The Riverina has a mixture of settlement patterns. Small country towns, two major urban centres and larger rural service centres are characteristic of the variety of population landscapes in the region. In each of these contexts the literacy demands placed on the individual are different, and the capacity of the individual to respond to literacy offerings is different. The two towns chosen for closer scrutiny fit into the middle category and although they are about the same size they present profiles of very different ways of living. The differences and similarities are exciting and informative for anyone interested in literacy in the region.

Cheldon has a population of about 1500 people. It is located in the west of the region at the end of a long country road that becomes spongy after the rain. Immense, treeless paddocks envelope the traveller who is lulled into thinking that this narrow strip of bitumen just goes on forever. Cheldon is the last town on a terminating highway and its nearest large regional neighbour is 130km away.

The township exudes an atmosphere of former prosperity. The wide verandahs of unused shops gather dust. There are no obvious extremes of wealth or poverty. The recently built houses are a modest concession to middle class rural building styles. A newly built school and community health centre remind the visitor that the town has a changed set of functions. The focus of the town has expanded to include the signs of post industrial Australia's commitment to health and education. Whilst agriculture is still the life blood of the town, increased mechanisation and the amalgamation of smaller farms to form large agricultural units has meant that the rural labour force has shrunk. A lot of these people have moved away to find employment elsewhere. The economy of Cheldon is not sufficiently broad based to accommodate and absorb these workers.

The geography of the town creates the impression of extensive space, there has been no need to concentrate shops, pubs, farm machinery distributors or petrol stations within a prescribed commercial centre. Everything is spread out. The flashes of advertising on the shop fronts are dull remnants of an age when Street's ice cream and Bushell's tea were all the rage. The billboards haven't been renewed because the customers haven't changed.

Cheldon is geographically isolated and it fulfills many of the stereotypical functions of the Riverina rural town. It provides the social, economic, educational and health focus for the surrounding large farms. People come to town to socialise, to shop, to talk about the weather, to change their books at the library or to see the local doctor. The town centre fulfills a multitude of functions. It is not likely that people would make a trip to the nearest large regional centre unless it was a special occasion. Some people have never been out of Cheldon.

The possibility of literacy problems existing in Cheldon is not likely to be acknowledged by the traditional residents. However, those who come to town armed with materials and bureaucratic tasks with a literacy component quickly appreciate that a proportion of the population are poor readers and writers.

Tracey, a tutor co-ordinator with TAFE says -

"People who are in the community say that they come across people who have difficulty reading and writing, so I am going by what I have been told by people who hold official positions - teachers, people who work in Social Security in the CES, visiting government bodies. All seem to feel that there is a big need for literacy services in the area, but for the first two years I was there, although I felt that they were probably right, because that is borne out in all the other places that I've visited, people don't seem to come forward. Now we may not have done enough publicity, it may just simply be that. But on the other hand the most important form of publicity is word of mouth in small communities."

The denial or oversight of low literacy levels amongst certain members of the Cheldon community is the result of a complex set of regional and personal factors. Firstly the profile of literacy is not a prominent one. Secondly the community is perceived as being critical of the non reader and writer. Thirdly the isolation of the town means that classes held at the nearest centre big enough to support this enterprise is prohibitive. No one wants to travel 260km after a day's work to attend literacy classes. Even the most enthusiastic student would be daunted by the prospect of 'roos on the road.' Similarly teachers are unwilling to travel to Cheldon at night.

In spite of all these apparently inhibiting factors literacy tuition is available in Cheldon. A collection of volunteer tutors trained and supported by TAFE offer literacy help to Cheldon community members. Given attitudes require that anonymity must be assured as must confidentiality. The tutors are perceptive about the literacy problems and accompanying social and emotional traditions which confront their adult learning partners.

Virginia thinks that some people in Cheldon are poor reader and writers -

" .... either because they weren't able to got to school regularly or because they were slow learners and they couldn't keep up at school."

Virginia's nephew and grandson can't read and write.

Maureen, another volunteer tutor echoes the sentiments of all her friends enrolled in tutor training when she explains that one of the most powerful influences acting on and stopping people from enrolling in courses for literacy help is embarrassment. She also mentions that the individual's ability to cope also insulates them against the need to learn to read and write. Cheldon is a highly supportive community.

Vivian, another tutor thinks that the lack of information about the sources of help prevents people from admitting their problems with literacy.

In Cheldon the tutor training program fills the literacy gap. Repeated efforts at publicity and public confidence building gradually overcame the inertia which surrounds the issue of literacy in this small Riverina town. The librarian, Elizabeth, was responsible for keeping the interest of the town engaged. Because of the isolation of the town and Elizabeth's enthusiasm, the library serves as the centre for many of the literate activities of the town. She frequently helps people fill in forms. She interprets their mail and helps them select reading materials that may help to raise their literacy level. The degree of

confidence which town residents invest in her confidentiality and competence has meant that she has been able to put poor readers and writers in touch with tutors, as well as helping to recruit volunteers for training by TAFE.

"One adult literacy student actually comes into the library and uses the materials after he has been put in touch with a tutor from TAFE."

Elizabeth takes her commitment to raising the literacy standard of some of her Cheldon acquaintances and friends very seriously. However she feels that there are a number of obstacles that need to be hurdled before any more can be done. One daunting problem is the perception which individual poor readers and writers have of their own abilities and status in the community. This influences their inclination to learn.

"Another person who has problems reading and writing is actually a friend of a friend. She has never learnt to read or write. She can sign her own name and she can recognise her children's names and things like that - she has no problem with that and she can basically work out bank forms and those sorts of things but she can't read notes that come home from school. She has to get her husband to do that and she can't read letters that she gets in the mail. She could never tackle a novel. But she is starting to think that it might be more of a physical problem. I know that they say that there's no such thing as dyslexia - I know that they have this new idea that it's not dyslexia, it's a reading problem, but she is saying that the words jump all over the page. And so she's starting to think that it's not so much that she's dumb or anything like that, but that she's got a sight problem. So I think that's giving her a bit of hope to keep trying to learn. She actually comes in here and borrows stories on cassettes. I know that she always has problems with things like the kids notes from school but she always has someone to ask like her husband. Probably the hardest thing is memorising everything. And I get the feeling that she thinks that she is letting the children down. And she has adopted the lifestyle that says that she has got as far as she is going to get and that's it. It's embarrassment. She feels that she is a failure."

Elizabeth, as a key community figure, has made an impact on the literate life of Cheldon. The support which TAFE has offered has meant that poor readers and writers have been put in touch with other community members in a confidential learning environment. The volunteer tutor program in Cheldon has provided an on the spot solution to some of the literacy needs of this community.

Elizabeth thinks that a lot more can be done on a public level to raise the profile of literacy and to offer poor readers and writers a sense of their own legitimacy.

"We need more publicity in that people know who they can go to if they have a reading problem. That they are not the only one. I guess that it would be hard for popular celebrities to come on television and say, 'Look I can't read or write', but that's what is needed. A few public people need to admit the problem so that people looked and saw and thought , 'Gee I'm not the only one. I'm not dumb. There is someone else who has got the same problem and they are making it alright.' So you could get case examples of people and advertise that. If they had a dozen people, then the people in Cheldon could identify with one of those. If you put an ad on tele that says, 'If you can't read and write call such and such.' It sounds so clinical. You have to publicise where they can come to with some degree of confidentiality."

Sandock

Sandock is located 45km from a major regional urban centre. It is attractive as a 'dormitory' suburb because it provides cheaper housing than can be found in the larger centre. It's population oscillates around a core of retired farmers, absentee farming families and people involved in servicing the economic and business needs of the township. It regularly receives new injections of people. The newer arrivals move in and out with an employment flexibility that leaves town members, with a greater sense of town history, stunned. It also earns them the reputation of 'blow ins'.

The predominant ethics of the town have been put in place by family traditions. The relationships between people have been prescribed by events far removed from the present day. The fact that the new bank manager must always take on the job of treasurer for any number of social and sporting organisations in the town is accepted as a piece of sacrosanct tradition. Professionals such as teachers and bankers who work and live in the town and those professionals who commute to the urban centre earn their right to be accepted by fulfilling a myriad of social responsibilities. The social dichotomy between people who work with their minds versus those who work with their bodies is stark.

The newer settlers in Sandock have contributed significantly to the economic revitalisation of the town. Regular events which attract large numbers of outside visitors are orchestrated and organised by groups of people with no historical or familial connections in the town. A variety of fund raising events help to bring the community and its money together. The annual Yabby competition and the Rotary Ball are often the determinants of the social calendar. They also keep the 'money in the town'.

There is great sense of heritage associated with Sandock. The newly painted shop fronts and storage sheds reflect an attitude of progress with an eye to the past. Beautifully kept public gardens, new shire buildings in the tradition of Federation architecture, and tree planting campaigns are the environmental expressions of a faith in growth and development. The conventional wisdom is that as the urban centre grows so will Sandock. It will be increasingly attractive as a well serviced rural retreat within easy access to employment, education and entertainment. The residents are justifiably enthusiastic about the prospects for the town.

Sandock is surrounded by productive farms where the story goes that even in the worst of conditions the farmers always get their seed back. The farmers, in spite of their ostensible wealth, are finding that the changing market conditions for agricultural products and the ever spiralling costs are reducing their incomes. These facts of agricultural life demand that all family members pull their weight.

Many people who are employed by the businesses in Sandock have held the same positions for all of their working lives. Jobs on the Shire, in the garage or the chemist shop are highly sought after and people who hold down these positions do so with a great deal of tenacity. The influx of population while it has contributed to the economic buoyancy of the town, has not created many new jobs. School leavers have to look elsewhere for employment. Perhaps they will find it in the nearby regional centre, otherwise they are forced to move away in search of jobs.

"A couple of young fellas from here left town and went to Melbourne looking for work. Once they get forms shoved in their faces and told, 'Here fill this out', they say that they just screw them up and walk away."

Sandock has medical services and educational provisions. However the relatively easy access to a well stocked urban centre tends to remove the necessity to replicate large town services in the small town context. There is a sense amongst residents which recognises the benefits of small town living and acknowledges the advantages of being so close to a major centre. The newer arrivals are appreciative of this interdependence and once settled people are reluctant to leave the lifestyle that Sandock provides. It is a rich community and the newer ranch style houses reflect the affluence created by low land prices in the town. The quality of life results from a fortunate blend of small town rural living with all the advantages of accessibility to a major city.

In spite of the influx of a new group of people into the community the rules and regulations of social protocol are still very much in place. The pubs have been slow to admit women to the public bar. The social divisions between labourer and land owner are still very clear. The influence of the ethic which maintains farming as a deified activity influences social relationships. In this context literacy is regarded as a relatively unimportant skill. The necessity for physical work and the long hours that it entails leaves little time for the pleasantries of a quiet book. The literate tasks which confront the farmer are often carried out by the female who 'keeps the books'. New technology and methods are usually assessed in terms of verbal reports from other farmers. Pesticides and herbicides are controlled by chemical company representatives or the Ag and Vet supplier who offers advice, measures paddock size, checks whether the fences have been moved in the recent past and specifies mixture rates for fertilisers, seed and chemical applications. The attendant dangers are obvious but the farmer need do nothing except follow the directions and pay the bills. Farming can involve very few literacy activities.

In spite of the low profile of literacy amongst the farming community there still exists the need to keep literacy problems a secret from the general public. Generally being a poor reader or writer is a cause for embarrassment and cover up. The community is generally not publicly supportive of people who can't read and write.

Paul a local solicitor comments on the techniques which people use to divert attention from their poor reading and writing skills.

"They have given up and they have also developed some very good techniques for getting around it. By saying, 'I've got this, what does this mean?' So you are not really saying that you haven't read it or that you can't understand it. I've noticed it in the Bowling Club, some of the people who ask that, they don't read. And people who are talented in their different fields but who just don't have a fluency with their language."

Sophisticated methods of dealing with literate tasks have been developed. Networks of friends and family preserve the status of the poor reader and writer. There is no need to change. Robert discusses the mechanics of the relationship.

"It doesn't worry me. I sort of don't tell everybody. I tell me mates so that they have an idea. I've never found it a problem. You know what I mean, so I let it roll at that. I know 7 other blokes in the same boat. It does affect me I suppose at different times. When I have blokes with me and I have to take them out on the job with me and they might just drop a note saying that I have to take pipes to such and such a place. They understand at work so they just have a yarn to you and they say what's got to be done and a way you go. I'm lucky in an environment where it's not essential just to stay at my level of work. If you want to go higher you need it."

Paul thinks that is is impossible to admit low literacy skills in Sandock.

"It is an embarrassment, it is a downgrading thing to say that you can't read."

The anonymity of classes offered in the nearby city are the only present alternative, but the courage needed to confront learning in an institutionalised environment is not always there.

"Some people can swallow their pride and others can't swallow their pride. And that's what it boils down to. We all have our pride and our own sets of values and how far we want to come down or up is up to the individual."

If as Paul says it's a matter of pride then it is up to the community to provide a context where the poor reader and writer can improve their skills without sacrificing their self esteem.

For the poor reader and writer in Sandock courses are available - a twenty minute drive away. But few people take advantage of this offering and few key community people are aware of the services provided. They are aware of literacy problems but have few practical ideas about what to do to overcome the problems. The profile of literacy is clouded with community ignorance. The key community figures perceive the dimensions of the problem but take it no further. It is a case of being so close and yet so far away.

THE WORD FROM THE RIVERINA IS:

* Key community people need to be better informed about literacy and how it is developed.

* Providers have actively to recruit students.

* Community-based programmes work best.

* Different formats for tuition have to be available and in non-institutional settings.

* Becoming literate may mean having to change relationships, views and responsibilities.

* General community support and understanding is vital for any widespread change.

* Access to providers is determined by travel, child care and finance.

* Embarrassment is the biggest barrier.

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FIGURE 1

DISTANCE/ TRAVELLING TIME

	Albury	Deniliquin	Griffith	Narrandera	Temora	Tumut	Wagga Wagga	Mildura	Finley	Hay	Cootamundra	Barham	Leeton
Albury		206km 2.30	263km 3.00	168km 2.00	222km 2.50	205km 2.40	130km 1.45	550km 7.00	146km 2.00	312km 3.40	222km 2.50	322km 4.10	200km 2.30
Deniliquin	206km 2.30		220km 2.30	202km 2.20	340km 4.00	360km 4.30	254km 3.00	340km 3.50	60km 0.45	105km 1.15	346km 4.05	120km 1.30	233km 2.40
Griffith	263km 3.00	220km 2.30		94km 1.10	140km 1.40	300km 4.00	196km 2.30	464km 5.30	170km 2.05	153km 1.50	200km 2.30	340km 3.50	63km 0.40
Narrandera	168km 2.00	202km 2.20	94km 1.10		138km 1.50	203km 2.40	98km 1.10	486km 5.50	140km 1.40	175km 2.05	154km 1.50	315km 3.40	31km 0.45
Temora	222km 2.50	340km 4.00	140km 1.40	138km 1.50		155km 2.00	92km 1.15	619km 8.00	280km 3.20	313km 4.00	56km 0.45	455km 5.30	170km 2.05
Tumut	205km 2.40	360km 4.30	300km 4.00	203km 2.40	155km 2.00		105km 1.30	690km 9.00	300km 3.40	380km 4.40	92km 1.15	462km 5.40	235km 2.50
Wagga Wagga	130km 1.45	254km 3.00	196km 2.30	98km 1.10	92km 1.15	105km 1.30		584km 7.00	205km 2.30	273km 3.15	92km 1.20	370km 4.10	130km 1.40

FIGURE 2

POPULATION SUMMARY, NSW, 1954-86

URBAN CENTRE CATEGORY	POPULATION		INCREASE			% INCREASE
	1954	1986	1954-86	1976-81	1981-86	1954-86
Sydney	1982076	3228244	1246168	155877	147770	62.9
Wollongong	96375	206803	110428	8510	-1848	114.6
Hunter	257194	411366	154172	26548	14293	59.9
North Coast	105017	220239	115222	36208	20356	109.9
South Coast	29000	94286	65286	18752	12872	225.1
Inland	390547	552077	132530	28102	15219	33.9

1981-86: Sydney's increase was approximately 150,000; NSW increase was approximately 60,000.

Source: ABS Urban Centre data 1954-86. Classified by David Jones.

FIGURE 3

INLAND STATISTICAL DIVISIONS

NSW 1971-86 POPULATION

DIVISION	1971	1986	1971-86	% CHANGE
Murray	88150	103110	14950	17.0
Riverina	134950	140540	5590	4.1
Northern	141600	177309	35709	25.2
North Western	94700	110581	15991	16.8
Central West	142100	161597	19497	13.7
Far West	33950	29162	-4788	-14.1
TOTAL	**635450**	**722289**	**86839**	**13.7**

FIGURE 4

POPULATION OF URBAN CENTRES AND BOUNDED RURAL LOCALITIES, RIVERINA, 1981 AND 1986

	1981	1986
Adelong	806	855
Ariah Park	301	311
Ardlethan	602	520
Barellan	380	391
Batlow	1354	1227
Coleambally	565	562
Coolamon	1088	1088
Cootamundra	6540	6314
Darlington Point	599	735
Forest Hill	1977	2068
Ganmain	650	614
Goolgowie	245	256
Griffith	13187	13630
Gundagai	2308	2124
Hanwood	306	399
Hay	2958	2961
Hillston	999	1052
Ivanhoe	517	449
Junee	3993	3720
Leeton	5498	6421
Lockhart	923	910
Narrandera	5013	4385
Tarcutta	263	249
Temora	4350	4295
The Rock	693	768
Tumut	5816	6099
Uranquity	328	477
Wagga Wagga	36837	37577
Whitton	344	369
Yanco	415	408
TOTAL	**99855**	**101685**

These population data reveal a small increase in urban centres and bounded rural localities for the period 1981-86. As the region as a whole lost population during this period, Table 5 indicates by implication a dramatic decline in the rural, almost certainly farm, component of the population. Ironically but not surprisingly, although the population is static, economic activity is diverse and in some sectors expanding. All sectoral analysis tends to be a little naive because structures and ownership networks rarely recognise sectoral boundaries. Nevertheless it is a useful way both to describe the region's economy and to highlight the economic - environmental interrelationships.

FIGURE 5

NUMBER OF NON-ENGLISH SPEAKING BACKGROUND (NESB) STUDENTS IN THE REGION BY TYPE

	1986	1987	1988	1989
Primary	479	624	551	637
Secondary	466	560	622	496
Specials	9	9	11	13
Regional Total	954	1193	1184	1146
State Total	**114619**	**123109**	**129596**	**133256**
Regional Proportion	**0.83%**	**0.97%**	**0.91%**	**0.86%**

(NSW Department of Education)

FIGURE 6

ENROLMENT BY EDUCATIONAL REGION JUNE 1988

The table below gives the June 1988 enrolments and area for each educational region.

REGION	ENROLMENT	AREA IN SQUARE KILOMETRES
Metropolitan West	123621	5353
Metropolitan East	108734	664
Metropolitan North	104256	2817
Metropolitan South West	101819	3564
Hunter	72727	30828
South Coast	67876	53448
North Coast	60478	35862
Western	45519	369755
Riverina	38801	155388
North West	33029	143614
Head Office	1061	
TOTAL	**757921**	**801343**

In the Table above the regions have been ordered from highest to lowest enrolment. Metropolitan West has the largest enrolment (123621 students) and North West the smallest (33029 students). Western is the largest region in terms of geographic size, while Metropolitan East, which incorporates the Inner City and the coastal Metropolitan areas south of the Parramatta River, is the smallest in size.

(NSW Department of Education)

FIGURE 7

REGIONAL GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS ENROLMENTS, TERM 1 1983-1989

Year	Primary	Secondary	SSP	Total	Proportion of State
1983	25143	16108	0	41251	5.34%
1984	24304	16687	0	40991	5.35%
1985	23678	16834	0	40512	5.36%
1986	22851	16906	0	39757	5.30%
1987	22660	16672	0	39332	5.21%
1988	22285	16741	0	39026	5.18%
1989	22176	16143	0	38319	5.15%

(NSW Department of Education)

FIGURE 8

NUMBER OF KOORI STUDENTS IN THE REGION

	1986	1987	1988	1989
Primary	642	716	678	721
Secondary	446	430	429	404
Specials	5	11	7	9
Regional Total	1093	1157	1114	1134
State Total	13314	14252	14932	15118
Regional Proportion	8.21%	8.12%	7.46%	7.5%

(NSW Department of Education)